THE SHI'ITES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

AN IRANIAN FIFTH COLUMN?



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AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

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Introduction:
Does America Get the Shi'ites Wrong?

MICHAEL RUBIN

Shi'ism has a public relations problem, at least, in the United States. Most Americans formed their perception of Shi'ism not by reading its rich internal debates or exploring its diversity and cultural heritage, but rather by seeing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini lead chants of "Death to America" after the 1979 Iranian revolution and Iranian hostage takers scaling embassy walls and then parading blindfolded, abused diplomats on television. Less than four years later, Shi'ite operatives in Lebanon rammed a truck bomb into the headquarters of US Marines serving as peacekeepers in Beirut, killing 241 in an incident that propelled suicide terrorism to the forefront of the American conscience.

History and scholarly traditions also work against Western understanding of the Shi'ites. There is hardly an Islamic studies or Middle Eastern history class in American (or European) universities that does not teach that Shi'ism broke off from mainstream Sunni Islam because of a dispute about who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad. As far as Shi'ites are concerned, however, the opposite is true: they believe Shi'ism represents pure, unadulterated Islam and that it was the Sunnis—or, more accurately, those who became the Sunnis—who fractured the faith. That the Sunni narrative is accepted blindly today rests on two main factors. First, when Western scholars began to study Islam rigorously centuries ago, geography forced them to first traverse Sunni territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire. In doing this, they gained their first introduction to Islam and accepted blindly the Ottoman sultan's sectarian narrative.

Second, while Sunnis are the clear majority in the Islamic world, comprising 85 to 90 percent of world Muslims, such proportions can be deceptive. The majority does not necessarily rule because in the Middle East—from the Levant through Iran—there is near parity between Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Anti-Shi'ite bias also permeates academia. The world's wealthiest Islamic countries tend to be overwhelmingly Sunni. Many American universities receive Saudi, Qatari, Emirati, or Turkish largesse, generosity which often leads to sympathetic treatment for Sunni lands. Because of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's placement on the state sponsor of terror list, however, Iran is unable to fund equivalent programs. When it has tried, its proxy groups have attracted the attention of US law enforcement.[1]

US military involvement in the Middle East over the last two decades has distorted the public image of Shi'ism further. US Central Command (CENTCOM) covers 20 countries—Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Yemen—of which only two—Iran and Iraq (or three, if Alawi-led Syria is considered)—are Shi'ite-led. CENTCOM commanders, however, do not maintain contact with Iranians or Syrian government officials, so the entirety of the US military's interaction with Shi'ites is with Iraqis.

The job description of American generals in the Middle East goes beyond the purely military. Many act as de facto diplomats, if not ambassadors. They meet not only with their military counterparts, but also with prime ministers, presidents, and kings. In Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain, host-nation political and military leaders regularly disparage Shi'ites and reinforce sectarian prejudice, depicting all Shi'ites as an Iranian fifth column. Perhaps the most famous example of this was King Abdullah II of Jordan's warning about the rise of a Shi'ite crescent.

While Iran has sought to coopt Shi'ite minorities across the Middle East for its own political purposes, it has been abetted by the willingness of many Sunni leaders, along with the United States, to demonize Shi'ite communities as nothing more than Iranian proxies.

This, in turn, allows Tehran to depict itself as the only protector Shi'ites can count on.

The reality is that Shi'ites across the globe more often resent Iran than embrace it. Part of this is theological: the majority of Shi'ite leaders outside the Islamic Republic (and even many inside Iran) reject the religious theories Khomeini embraced. Shi'ite religious leaders outside Iran prefer both a more pluralistic approach to theological interpretation and a basic division between mosque and state. Ironically, this means that Shi'ism is itself revolutionary Iran's Achilles' heel: because Iran's Supreme Leader considers himself the deputy of the messiah on earth and the ultimate arbiter on all matters religious and political, any dissent from other Shi'ite leaders undercuts his authority. This creates a dynamic in which Iranian authorities—for the survival of their regime and to protect the Iranian Supreme Leader from any challenge on any topic—seek to subjugate other Shi'ite communities directly or, more often, by proxy.

In addition to ideology, another reason is that Shi'ite communities have realized that the Iranian regime is not a genuine protector is because of Tehran's naked politicking with its nominal Shi'ite protégés. In Saudi Arabia, moderate Shi'ite leaders cut ties with Iran after Tehran pressured them to adopt violence and terrorism against Riyadh. Moreover, Shi'ites from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan who fled wars in their homelands and relocated to Iran have been subject to state discrimination, hardship, and humiliation.

Few Shi'ites, however, accept such Iranian attempts to subvert and dominate their communities. Across the region, Shi'ite communities work to maintain their independence. They might have deep connections with theological centers in Iran, but religious ties do not necessarily mean that they follow Iran on political matters. For example, though critics of the US-led campaign to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein condemn the war as empowering Iran by subordinating Iraq to its influence, such criticism oversimplifies the situation. The Iranian government may have tried to exploit Saddam's downfall, but both Iraqi political and religious authorities have worked consistently to blunt and rebuff that influence, to varying degrees of success.

Perhaps nowhere has Iran been as successful as in Lebanon influencing and dominating the local Shi'ite community. Links between Iranian and Lebanese Shi'ites date back more than 500 years, but only in the wake of the Islamic Revolution did the Iranian government seek to revive those ties in the form of Hezbollah. Created by the Iranian government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the wake of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah has consolidated military and political control over Lebanon's Shi'ite population. Its heavy-handed tactics—and questions over its mission in the wake of Israel's 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon (the territorial dispute surrounding the 14-square-mile Shebaa Farms notwithstanding)—have led Lebanese Shi'ites increasingly to question why Hezbollah should represent them and at what cost.

The same dynamic has been at play in Syria, where Hezbollah's willingness to brutalize the population has led some Shi'ites to juxtapose the reality of their actions with rhetoric their leaders espouse. Whether the Lebanese can undercut Hezbollah's control ultimately will determine the future of Lebanon's once-dynamic Shi'ite community.

Bahrain, one of only two majority-Shi'ite populations in the Arab world, hosts one of the more aggrieved communities, having suffered sectarian discrimination by the Sunni minority government since independence. But even as Bahrain's Shi'ites rally for equal rights, many—but not all—of the nation's Shi'ite leaders work to rebuff Iranian attempts to infiltrate and coopt the movement.

Other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have adopted different strategies to address sectarian tension. Whereas Bahrain's government uses rubber bullets, Saudi Arabia uses live ammunition against Shi'ite protesters in the Kingdom's oil-rich Eastern Province, where Shi'ites form the majority. Kuwait, which hosts a significant Shi'ite minority, has embraced a different strategy, working assiduously to discourage and, at times, criminalize sectarian incitement encouraged by either Shi'ite or Sunni extremists. Rather than repress Shi'ite political participation, Kuwait has sought to encourage, tying Shi'ites closer to the state rather than branding them outsiders. In other GCC cases, the Shi'ites really are the outsiders. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman do not face the same sectarian diversity among citizens.

However, they still face sectarianism among the many foreign guest workers their economies depend on.

Non-Arab neighbors of Iran are also home to significant Shi'ite populations. Azerbaijan has both a majority Shi'ite population and a Shi'ite government, albeit one that has chosen to embrace the separation of mosque and state. By doing so, it challenges the Iranian model because its success undercuts the Islamic Republic's claim that it has implemented God's model. Pakistan's Shi'ite minority also provides useful juxtaposition because it shows the limits of Iranian influence. Although Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps created Hezbollah, which it used to make vast inroads into Lebanese society, Iran was unable to replicate that strategy in Pakistan. And despite the sectarian violence Pakistani Shi'ites face at the hands of Sunni extremists, the Pakistani Shi'ite community has rejected Iranian attempts to serve as its protector.

The unique situation and identity of Shi'ite communities outside Iran—examined in detail in the following pages—illustrates the diversity of Shi'ism and immediately undercuts the perception that Iran represents—or even is capable of representing—international Shi'ism. To accept Sunni sectarian propaganda that Shi'ites are a de facto fifth column snatches defeat from the jaws of victory, however, by empowering Iranian influence operations that claim that only Iran is capable of protecting the world's Shi'ites. If policymakers examine each Shi'ite community on its own terms and identify the various methods by which it undercuts or rebuffs Iranian influence, they can not only contribute to freedom and religious liberty for this important sectarian minority but also better prevent Sunni propaganda about the true political orientation of Shi'ites from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Note

1. See, for example, FBI, US Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, "Former President of Alavi Foundation Pleads Guilty in Manhattan Federal Court to Obstruction of Justice," press release, December 30, 2009, www.fbi.gov/newyork/press-releases/2009/nyfo123009.htm.

Has Iran Overplayed Its Hand in Iraq?

MICHAEL RUBIN

Al Qaeda's seizure of Ramadi and Fallujah in January 2014 propelled questions of sectarianism in Iraq to the forefront of Iraqi politics. Sectarianism, of course, is nothing new in Iraq. While some analysts attribute the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq with unleashing sectarianism, the tension between Sunni and Shi'ite Iraqis long predates Operation Iraqi Freedom. Ba'athism, the ideology that late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein embraced, was inherently sectarian. While it embraced Arabism as its central pillar, Saddam and many of his aides saw true Arabism through a sectarian lens. He suspected Shi'ites of harboring loyalty to Iran; indeed, he often labeled Iraqi Shi'ites "Safawi," the Arabic name for the 16th-century Safavid dynasty that converted Iran to Shi'ism. Beginning in the 1960s with the Ba'athist seizure of power and then in the 1980s with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, the Ba'athist regime stripped tens of thousands of Shi'ites of Iraqi citizenship and deported them to Iran. The Shi'ites, however, have from the beginning of Iraqi statehood considered themselves and their more traditional tribal ways as representing a more pure Arab identity.[1]

Iraqi Shi'ites have experienced a religious renaissance since a US-led coalition ousted Saddam, but the idea that the Iraqi Shi'ite community seeks for sectarian reasons to attach themselves to or be dominated by Iran misunderstands Iraqi history and politics and the attitudes of Iraqi Shi'ites. Rather than separate from their country, Iraqi Shi'ites have for decades worked both to integrate themselves into Iraqi society and to resist Iranian attempts to subvert their communal independence. Despite attempts by Iran to dominate Iraq politically, culturally, and economically, Iraqi Shi'ites have in

recent years been successful at resisting Iranian attempts at dominance. That does not mean that Iraqi Shi'ites will be pro-American or anti-Iranian, but only that they will not allow themselves to be puppets of a foreign state.

Ethnicity vs. Religion

The Iraqi-Iranian border is not only a political boundary, but an ethnic one as well. Iraq is overwhelmingly Arab, although Kurds predominate across the north of the country and Turkmen maintain centuries-old communities in and around Kirkuk and Tel Afar. In Iran, in contrast, ethnic Persians now represent only slightly more than half of the country, and Azeris and other Turkic minorities another fifth. Today, only about two percent of Iran is Arab.[2]

While religion is an important part of most Iraqis' identity, boiling identity down to only religion would be misleading. Iraqis are not simply Muslims or Christians, or Sunnis or Shi'ites, but are also Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen; urban or rural; educated or not; and tribal or more modern in outlook. To assume sectarian solidarity between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'ites discounts centuries of ethnic distrust, if not outright hostility. While Shi'ites embraced Iraqi statehood, rivalry with their Persian counterparts drove a wedge between the two national communities. Iraq hosts Shi'ite Islam's most prominent shrines and centers of scholarship. Iran, however, has for centuries maintained its own seminaries in Qom, a city less than 80 miles south of Tehran.

Nor does the Sunni-Shi'ite divide correlate to an embrace or rejection of Iraqi nationality. The Shi'ites led the 1920 revolt against the British that culminated in the establishment of the Iraqi kingdom, although the anti-British colonial uprising had enjoyed cross-sectarian appeal and participation. Sunnis dominated Iraqi governance in the wake of the country's independence, but rather than reject the state, Shi'ites pushed for greater participation. While the Iraqi king long enabled Shi'ites to run the Ministry of Education, with time they also assumed other portfolios including the presidency of Iraq's Senate and premiership.[3]

During the Iran-Iraq War, Shi'ite conscripts fought on the front lines while those more privileged by their tribal connections to Saddam served more safely in the rear. Indeed, Shi'ites comprised 70 percent of ordinary soldiers but only 20 percent of the officer corps.[4] Despite the discrimination Shi'ites (and Kurds) faced at the hands of the Ba'athist regime, few outright defected from Iraq to Iran during the war; rather, the Ba'athist government forced many to leave either by revoking citizenship or by decreeing membership in Shi'ite parties such as the Islamic Da'wa Party to be a capital offense. Those who did defect to Iran represented a far smaller group than those who, like the Mujahedin al-Khalq, a revolutionary terrorist group, defected from Iran to the service of Saddam. Both during and after the Iran-Iraq War and, indeed, to the present day, Iraqi Shi'ites observe Iraqi Armed Forces Day on January 6 because for Shi'ite conscripts and the broader community, the problem was always Saddam rather than the institution of the army.

The Evolution of Shi'ite Politics in Iraq

Shi'ite political thought was well developed in Iraq when the Ba'athist regime seized power in 1968. The constitutional movement in Iran infused new political thought into clerical circles, both in Iran and Iraq. In 1909, Mirza Muhammad Hussein Gharawi al-Na'ini wrote *The Admonition and Refinement of the People*, which imbued traditional Shi'ite thought with anticolonial politics and argued that until the hidden imam—Shi'ite Islam's messianic figure—returned, the people had to choose between tyranny and constitutionalism.[5]

Sheikh Mahdi al-Khalissi, also a top Shi'ite cleric, led the 1920 revolt against British rule. While Khalissi died in 1925 and Na'ini passed away in 1936, just four years after the Kingdom of Iraq gained its full independence, subsequent generations of theologians and political theoreticians whom Na'ini taught in Najaf built upon his work to outline the interplay between religious precepts and a constitutional framework encouraging popular representation through the appointment of deputies. This of course justified full Shi'ite participation in the Iraqi state.

In 1963, the Iranian shah launched the White Revolution, a modernization drive toward which he tolerated little dissent. However, as the shah moved to impose women's suffrage, encourage literacy and public health, and undertake land reform, he clashed with more conservative Iranian clerics like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whom he ultimately expelled from Iran. After a year in Turkey, Khomeini settled in Najaf, where he began to teach and preach. It was there that he resurrected the older clerical notion of a guardianship of the jurisprudent [*wilayat al-faqih*], which he developed most notably in a 1970 series of lectures later compiled into the book *Islamic Governance* [*Hukumah al Islamiyah*].[6] While Khomeini's peers largely rejected his arguments, he imposed his philosophy by force on Iran after the Islamic Revolution.

Many other clerics in Najaf—and, indeed, many in Iran—gravitated more toward the writings and philosophy of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a senior cleric who outlined the idea of a guardianship of the people [*wilayat al-umma*], which preached that man could be the trustee of God [*Khilafat al-insan*]. While Khomeini claimed that a supreme leader should act as the deputy of the messiah on earth and rule over man, Sadr argued that governance was "a right given to the whole of humanity."[7] Sadr wrote frequently on political and social issues of the day, not only parrying Khomeini's religious arguments but also deconstructing the Marxism that many Iraqi intellectuals embraced, and encouraging the publishing of booklets and pamphlets outlining an Islamic take on the primary social and political issues of the day.[8]

Khomeini was ideologically intolerant and developed personal enmity toward Sadr for rejecting Khomeini's notion of clerical rule in favor of empowering ordinary people. Khomeini's enmity—coupled with that of Saddam—ultimately sealed Sadr's fate. While Sadr supported the Islamic Revolution in Iran and recognized Khomeini as a grand ayatollah, Khomeini refused to affirm Sadr's religious rank and refused him shelter in Iran once Saddam began his crackdown on the Islamic Da'wa Party, for whom Sadr served as the spiritual mentor.[9] Saddam's regime subsequently imprisoned, tortured, and, on April 9, 1980, executed him.

Sadr's views shaped the development of the Da'wa Party, which he founded in 1958. But historically, Da'wa has been fractious. Da'wa initially attracted Shi'ites predominantly from the educated middle class, the very constituency whose political consciousness Saddam and the Ba'ath Party found most dangerous. Sadr did not exclude Sunnis from his vision; he encouraged Da'wa to establish and maintain relations with Sunni Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir, thus augmenting the danger that Sadr's activism posed to the Ba'athist regime.[10] Accordingly, Baghdad outlawed Da'wa and deemed membership a capital offense.

As Saddam's secret police began targeting Iraqi Shi'ite political activists, Da'wa activists fled the country, many finding uneasy refuge in Iran, with smaller communities establishing themselves in the United Kingdom or Syria. Those who fled to Iran were quickly disenchanted by the Shi'ite paradise they sought in the newly formed Islamic Republic. Khomeini measured loyalty not in religious devotion but in the embrace of his own religious philosophy. Those who dissented quickly found themselves targeted by Khomeini's security agencies. Many held true to Sadr's ideas but had little choice but to remain silent; they could not continue the political debate in which their counterparts in the United Kingdom engaged. This exacerbated divisions in Da'wa, which became clear when the two sides reunited after Iraq's liberation.

Before that day, however, British-based Da'wa activists found themselves effectively muzzled out of fear that Khomeini might respond to any direct challenge to his interpretation by targeting the Iraqi Da'wa members who had effectively become his hostages. Khomeini's overbearing attitude—and the poor treatment of many Iraqi refugees in Iran—did not endear the Islamic Republic to Iraqi Shi'ites. While many of those Iraqi refugees returned home in the wake of Saddam's ouster, their lingering resentment of Iran continues.

Shi'ites are not monolithic, and not all Iraqi exiles remained true to Sadr and his emphasis on popular sovereignty. Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who had worked closely with Sadr until his execution, did receive refuge in Iran. Rather than resist Khomeini's vision of clerical rule, Hakim embraced it. He split from Da'wa and formed a

new group, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), now renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and dedicated to ousting the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and replacing it with a Khomeini-style theocracy.

Repression of the Iraqi Shi'ites increased throughout the 1980s against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq War. The Iraqi government, questioning the loyalty of both its Shi'ite and Kurdish communities, forcibly displaced many who sought university placement or state jobs, sending Shi'ites north into Kurdish regions and forcing Kurds south into predominantly Shi'ite cities like Basra, Najaf, or Diwaniya. The aftermath of Operation Desert Storm and the US-led liberation of Kuwait compounded the problem. During a February 15, 1991, campaign stop, President George H.W. Bush called for "the Iraqi people [to] take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein the dictator to step aside." Iraqis listened and rose up against Ba'athist rule in 14 of Iraq's 18 governorates. Ironically, this US-encouraged 1991 uprising marked the first significant Shi'ite uprising in Iraq against the Iraqi government.[11]

Perceptions in the Middle East can mean more than reality. Whatever the logic behind and actuality of subsequent policy decisions in Washington, Iraqi Shi'ites almost universally see betrayal: the United States did not intervene as Saddam moved to crush the uprising. While the United States, in conjunction with France and Great Britain, sponsored a safe haven for Iraqi Kurds, there was no corollary protection for Iraqi Shi'ites: the southern no-fly zone did little to stop Iraqi tanks from crushing the uprising.

Shi'ites also sense conspiracy in the fact that the US military released Republican Guard prisoners of war against the backdrop of the uprising, enabling Saddam's forces to regroup and move against the Iraqi rebels. As Saddam augmented sectarian repression in the wake of the 1991 uprising, Iranian officials whisper that the American betrayal of Iraq's Shi'ites was deliberate and that, whether Iraqi refugees liked Iran or not, the Islamic Republic is the only trustworthy protector of the Shi'ites. Hence, Iran's state-controlled press often pushed conspiracy theories—such as secret visits by George W. Bush to Saddam's prison to plot Saddam's return—to once again

betray and repress Iraq's Shi'ites. Whereas Iraqi Shi'ites may have embraced the American military in 1991, the bitterness of perceived betrayal and more than a decade of continuous Iranian propaganda led to sustained resentment among the majority, and active hostility among a smaller cadre.

Post-Liberation Shi'ite Dynamics

Such resentment became apparent upon Iraq's 2003 liberation. While Iraqi Shi'ites reveled in their newfound religious freedom, their embrace of the American troops who had liberated them was far less enthusiastic than in 1991 when US forces had first pushed back Saddam's Republican Guards.

In Iraq (and also in Iran) there is a clerical aristocracy with a few families producing generations of renowned scholars marrying cousins or into other elite theological families. Of course, family name is not everything, and not every family member distinguishes himself or herself with mastery of existing Shi'ite scholarship and writing of new treatises. Some family members become black sheep and embarrassments to family name and reputation. This has been the case with Muqtada al-Sadr. Muqtada was a son-in-law of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and was the fourth son of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Iraq's preeminent ayatollah in the 1990s until his assassination in 1999. Muqtada never excelled at scholarship and was paid little heed either by his father or Iraq's other top ayatollahs. After all, he had three older brothers. No one imagined that, thanks to Saddam's murderous campaign against the clerics of Najaf, Muqtada would be the only one of his generation of Sadrs to survive.

Not surprisingly, the American government had very little sense of Muqtada before Iraq's liberation. This ended on April 10, 2003, when a mob loyal to him set upon rival cleric Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei in the Imam Ali Shrine, Najaf's holiest site, and hacked him to death. Khoei, the son of and successor to a prominent and popular ayatollah who had fled in 1991, had returned to Najaf with American assistance. Khoei embraced Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's notion of popular rule and thus stood in sharp contrast to the

theological interpretations embraced by Khomeini and his successor, Ali Khamenei, in Iran.

Muqtada al-Sadr and the Iranian leadership might not have agreed completely on theology, but they did have a common grievance. The United States was effectively seeking to restore the power of the Iraqi Shi'ites' religious hierarchy. This presented a challenge not only to Iran's concept of clerical rule but also to Muqtada al-Sadr's personal ambition, since he could not compete in prestige or rank with the top ayatollahs in Najaf. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps did not hesitate to coopt and channel Sadr's resulting anti-American fervor. Sadr's embrace of Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih* was seldom enthusiastic or consistent, but the Iranian regime was looking more for a tool with which to wage undeclared war against the Americans than simply a theological clone.

Whether with regard to Muqtada al-Sadr, who never left Iraq before the US-led invasion, or SCIRI founder Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who spent a lengthy exile in Iran, Iranian authorities soon realized that their influence was more limited than they expected. For all of Muhammad Baqir's rhetoric while residing in Iran, as soon as he returned to Iraq he abandoned his previous embrace of *wilayat al-faqih*. "Neither an Islamic government nor a secular administration will work in Iraq but a democratic state that respects Islam as the religion of a majority of the population," Muhammad Baqir declared upon his return after 23 years in exile.[12] While a car bomb killed him on August 29, 2003, neither his brother Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, who succeeded him, nor Ammar al-Hakim, who took ISCI's mantle upon Abdul Aziz's death in 2009, has returned the party to its one-time embrace of *wilayat al-faqih*.

Indeed, this has been a consistent pattern in post-liberation Iraq, much to the chagrin of authorities in Tehran. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps trained or helped organize multiple Iraqi militias, most prominently Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi [Army of the Messiah, or JAM] and ISCI's Badr Corps. Sponsorship of multiple political groups and militias might seem counterproductive to Western policymakers, who traditionally seek to streamline decision making and policy execution, but it is part and parcel of traditional

Persian statecraft: duality enhances control because it enables the Iranian leadership to make patronage a competition and to play clients off each other for Iran's broader interests. This in effect creates a seesaw—or cyclical—effect, as one group rises while the other falls but neither group ever either fails completely or gains enough strength to become truly independent.

The competition between the Badr Corps and JAM illustrated well Tehran's struggle for control: while both retained their staunch anti-American and anti-occupation positions, after returning to Iraq many Badr Corps commanders ceased following direct Iranian orders and instead began to allow Iraqi nationalist attitudes to color decisions that lumped the United States and Iran together as "the other." So long as the Badr Corps was willing to hunt down and murder Iraqi Air Force pilots who had participated in the bombing of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran would fund ISCI generously and provide enough weaponry to give ISCI a qualitative and quantitative edge over other Shi'ite groups.

However, as soon as the Badr Corps began acting too independently of Iranian interests or dictates, Tehran's largesse would shift to Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr always embraced Iraqi nationalism, even if he harbored a different vision of it than that put forward by liberal Iraqis and established clergy. He did not hesitate to accept Iranian largesse, even if it came at a cost to his independence, but as soon as he asserted himself too much or believed he could continue without heeding his Iranian minders, he would find himself cut off from resources. Hence, during the years of American military occupation, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and Sadr seemed to repeatedly alternate their position of Iranian favor.

Is Shi'ism Iran's Achilles' Heel?

While some American policymakers and many military analysts conflate all Shi'ites under the Iranian umbrella, waging insurgency against coalition troops was not the only objective of Iran-trained militias. Shi'ism is not only the Islamic Republic's raison d'être, but it is also revolutionary Iran's Achilles' heel. Saddam's suppression of

Najaf and Karbala had ironically strengthened the Iranian regime because it prevented any real religious challenge to Khomeini and, subsequently, Khamenei's authority.

The Iranian security apparatus, meanwhile, works to suppress religious dissent at home. Iranian authorities, for example, kept Grand Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri under house arrest until his death, and banned publication of his memoirs.[13] Iraq's liberation reinvigorated Shi'ite practice and scholarship inside the country. Long-constrained political and theological debates resumed as Da'wa exiles from London, Damascus, and Tehran reunited in Baghdad. Millions of Iraqi Shi'ites marched in religious processions long prohibited by the Iraqi regime. Najaf-based grand ayatollahs like Ali Sistani (himself an Iranian) could once again preach openly and communicate with not only Iraqi followers but also Iranian religious pilgrims.

Sistani recognizes that the Islamic Republic is just as vicious toward dissenting clergy as Saddam was. Sistani survived Saddam's rule by understanding who controlled the guns outside his house. He is no chameleon: he will not parrot those in power, but he will calibrate his vociferousness in the challenge to that power. He was noticeably more restrained in his willingness to challenge Iranian dictates when Badr Corps or JAM militiamen controlled the streets of Najaf than he was during periods of US military or Iraqi Army control. Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi, a prominent Iranian ayatollah who opposes clerical rule, remains in poor health in prison after his 2006 arrest in Qom for opposing *wilayat al-faqih*. Iran maintains a Special Clerical Court to prosecute clergy who stray from the Iranian supreme leader's approved line.[14]

In February 2013, Iranian security forces arrested prominent Iraqi religious scholar Ahmad al-Qubanshi during a visit to Iran. Qubanshi had for more than 30 years published articles and books criticizing the theological arguments at the basis of Iran's Islamic Republic.[15] Iran fears that, should Iraqi Shi'ites achieve an independent space to conduct theological discourse removed from Iranian control, the result might be a theological challenge to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's notion of himself as the primary source of emulation and the deputy of the messiah on earth.

By sponsoring militias inside Iraq, Iranian authorities try to impose through force of arms what is not in the hearts and minds of ordinary Iraqis. Hence, Badr Corps militiamen posted themselves outside girls' schools in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad to enforce a dress code not enshrined in Iraqi law or custom, and Muqtada al-Sadr's militiamen harassed, detained, and beat university students in Basra participating in a spring social. The Iranian strategy has not worked, however. Both the Badr Corps and JAM have antagonized more Iraqis than they have rallied. Across southern Iraq, Shi'ite leaders acknowledge that the twenty-somethings who embraced sectarian Shi'ite parties with enthusiasm after Iraq's liberation have come to recognize that they offer no panacea to Iraq's myriad woes. This does not mean that Iraqi youth are turning away from sectarian parties on political Islam, but they do not approach such institutions with the revolutionary fervor that Iranian authorities can more easily exploit.

Trade or Exploitation?

If militias represent a kinetic strategy to control and subordinate Iraqi Shi'ites, economic domination represents a softer lever of power that, of course, aims to control not only Baghdad and southern Iraq's Shi'ite population, but also, more broadly, Iraqi society as a whole. Close economic ties are natural. The two countries share a 900-mile frontier, and Iran's population is perhaps three times that of Iraq. Economic relations have expanded exponentially since Saddam's fall. While Iran-Iraq trade was negligible from the war years of the 1980s through the days of sanctions, by 2004, the first full year after Saddam's fall, bilateral Iran-Iraq trade was just $800 million. By 2012, the last year for which statistics are available, bilateral trade had reached an estimated $12 billion.[16]

While Iraqis welcome the millions of dollars that Iranian religious pilgrims spend in the hotels, shops, and restaurants of Najaf and Karbala, trade is largely one way. Iraqi Kurdistan, Kirkuk, Baghdad, and al-Amarah have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on Iranian electricity, even before a July 2013 four-year bilateral $14.8 billion deal for Iran to supply Iraq with natural gas to power its electrical plants.[17]

In addition, Iran floods Iraq with manufactured goods, agriculture, and foodstuffs, harming Iraqi industries.[18] Iranian merchants do not hesitate to undercut Iraqi competition, further stymying Iraq's economic recovery and leading to a great deal of resentment toward Iran not only in the Kurdish north of Iraq, but also in Baghdad and even in predominantly Shi'ite areas in southern Iraq, such as Basra and Nasiriya.

Iraqi businessmen, whether Sunni, Shi'ite, or Kurdish, regularly complain that they cannot access the Iranian market or, indeed, travel easily to Iran to conduct business because of the sometimes onerous and arbitrary Iranian permit process invoked more for Iraqi Shi'ites than other Iraqis. It is one of the ironies of post-war Iraq that Iraqi Kurds find it easier to travel to Iran than do their Shi'ite counterparts, for whom Iranian authorities make border crossing permits difficult to acquire, largely out of fear that Iraqi Shi'ites might harbor subversive religious views.

Iranian contractors have developed a reputation for seeking inflated prices for substandard goods. Many Iraqis have accordingly begun to seek alternatives to Iranian business and increasingly seek to encourage American and European firms to bid on contracts. Despite the resentment that its business practices build, Iran does not hesitate to use its Iraqi clients to hamper competition. SCIRI and Sadrist officials at the Basra Airport, for example, have sought to saddle American and European businessmen with nonexistent regulations to hamper their operation. This has only further antagonized relations as Iraqi businessmen feel themselves forced into deleterious partnerships with Iranians, whom they dislike. Indeed, Iran's willingness to play hardball has even led many Iraqis to reconsider their attitudes toward the American military. After an Iranian squad seized a Fakka oil well in the Maysan Governorate in January 2010, Iraqi papers called on the United States to help Iraq protect its territorial integrity.[19]

Conclusion

Decades of war and sanctions eviscerated the Iraqi economy and Iraqi power. The United States managed in a matter of weeks to

do what Iran could not do, even after eight years of unrestricted warfare: oust Saddam. Iraq essentially became a vacuum that multiple forces sought to fill: the United States and the coalition it led hope to rebuild Iraq and allow the country to rejoin the international community as an Arab democracy; al Qaeda sank roots in al-Anbar, Mosul, and Baghdad and propagated a radically different vision; Iran sought to assert its dominance over Iraq's Shi'ites and the central government; and Turkey sought unsuccessfully to fill Iraq's economic vacuum.

The new Iraqi government, for its part, was too weak to fight off all competing interests and instead sought to create space for independent action by playing regional interests off each other: Iraqi officials would tell both Iranian and American diplomats and military officers that their respective actions were constrained by the other and then pursue policies that made neither Tehran nor Washington happy.

The December 2011 American withdrawal upset Baghdad's traditional balance and undercut Iraqi politicians' ability to resist Iranian demands. That said, Iraqi Shi'ites continue to make clear their resentment of what they see as Iran's overbearing attitude. When Khalaf Abdul Samad, the governor of Basra, sought to inaugurate a new bridge over the Shatt al-Arab on June 4, 2013, Iranian officials warned him to choose a different date as June 4 marked the commemoration of Khomeini's death. Abdul Samad responded by simply increasing the fireworks display so Iranians, who can see the lights of Basra from their homes, could witness the Iraqi celebrations on what, for the Islamic Republic, was a day of mourning.

Such independence and insults do not pass without a cost. Even though Abdul Samad was popular in Basra for the development projects he initiated and was the top vote-getter in provincial elections, the Iranian government pushed ISCI and the Sadrists into an uneasy coalition to oust him shortly after. Raw power can still trump hearts and minds.

For that reason, Iran—and those inside Iraq whom it coopts and coerces—will still pose a risk to US regional security interests. Banners in Basra announce the obituaries of those killed fighting for Syrian regime forces or Hezbollah in Syria, a conflict in which the

Iraqi government is officially neutral. Iraqi officials acknowledge the problem of Iranian recruitment inside Iraq but say they are simply too weak to roll back Iranian influence without a countervailing one. They also first face more existential threats given the resurrection of al Qaeda and potential Kurdish separatism.

As individuals, some Iraqi Shi'ites might, for ideology or privilege, embrace militias backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iraqi politics are, however, far more complicated than the all-Shi'ites-are-Iranian-puppets narrative would allow. As Iranian-backed militias augment their presence in Iraq, they either force a backlash within the communities they seek to represent or they lose their ideological purity to the more powerful, seductive forces of Iraqi nationalism. Iranian leaders may want a compliant little brother or even a puppet in Iraq. No matter what their caricature in the West, however, Iraqis Shi'ites show no desire to oblige.

Notes

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3. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 127–29.

4. Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 93.

5. Mirza Muhammed Hussein Ghawari al-Na'ini, *Tanbih al-ummah wa-tanzih al-millah* [The Admonition and Refinement of the People] (Qom: Bustan-i Kitab, 2003); and Sama Hadad, "The Development of Shi'ite Islamic Political Thought," in *Dissent and Reform in the Arab World*, eds. Jeffrey Azarva, Danielle Pletka, and Michael Rubin (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2008), 32–40.

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7. Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, *al-Islam Yaqudu al-Hayah* [Islam Directive to Life] (Beirut: Dar al-Ta'aruf lil-Matbu'at, 1990).

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18 Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Iran/Iraq: Trade Flow Increases, but Mostly from Tehran to Baghdad," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 4, 2008, www.rferl.org/content/article/1079581.html.

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Is Sectarian Tension Plunging Lebanon into a New Civil War?

AHMAD K. MAJIDYAR

Over the last half century, the Shi'ite community in Lebanon has emerged from obscurity to become the most influential political and military powerhouse in the country. With Iranian financial and military assistance, Hezbollah—a predominantly Shi'ite group and a US-designated terrorist organization—dominates Lebanese politics, maintains a militia force stronger than the Lebanese Armed Forces, runs an extensive social welfare program, and functions as a state within a state.

Recently, Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian civil war has inflamed long-standing Shi'ite-Sunni tension in Lebanon, radicalized the Sunni community, and paralyzed the political system, threatening to plunge the country into another civil war. Moreover, with Damascus grappling with its own internal conflict and Washington's engagement in the Middle East at its nadir, Iran has stepped up its hard- and soft-power efforts to fill the vacuum and has emerged as the most influential external force in Lebanese affairs at the expense of US geo-political interests in the region.

From Marginalization to Political and Military Dominance

The history of Lebanese Shi'ites is marked by religious persecution, economic deprivation, and political marginalization. Under four centuries of Sunni Ottoman rule (1516–1918), Lebanon's Shi'ite community suffered state discrimination for alleged ties with Persia, and sociopolitical life improved only marginally under the French

mandate after World War I. In 1943, the Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims forged the National Covenant (*al-Mithaq al-Watani*), an unwritten agreement that laid the foundation for Lebanon's independence and a government system based on sectarian distribution of political power: the Maronites, then considered a plurality, secured the presidency, and the Shi'ite and Sunni communities won the premiership and speakership of parliament, respectively. Although it was agreed that other government positions would be distributed proportionally among Lebanon's then-17 recognized sects, the Shi'ite community remained underrepresented in the government.[1]

Beginning in the 1950s, however, four key developments spurred the community's shift from acquiescence and marginalization to militancy and political activism: (1) demographic changes and internal displacements; (2) the arrival of Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr from Iran; (3) the 1982 Israeli occupation; and (4) the 1979 Islamic revolution and Iran's creation of Hezbollah.

Demographic Changes and Internal Displacement

Following the 1948–49 Arab-Israeli wars, about 100,000 Palestinian refugees moved to southern Lebanon, and the number more than tripled by the end of the 1967 Six-Day War.[2] When Jordan expelled the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the early 1970s, the PLO relocated to Lebanon, where it set up several military training camps, usurped Shi'ite farmlands in the south, and forcibly recruited young Shi'ite men into its militia force. The southern Shi'ite heartland also became a frequent target of Israeli retaliatory attacks to the Palestinians' cross-border militant activity.[3]

As a result, many young Shi'ite men escaped the spiraling violence and grinding poverty in the south in search of a better life abroad, while poorer Shi'ite families moved to the suburbs of western Beirut—then notoriously called the "Belt of Misery."[4] In 1920, the Shi'ite community in Beirut numbered only about 1,500, but when the civil war broke out in 1975, Shi'ites had become the single largest community in Beirut—accounting for over 80 percent of the workforce in Beirut factories and for over 50 percent of service

workers in Christian-dominated eastern parts of the capital.[5]

The Lebanese Shi'ites have also seen a demographic revolution in recent decades. There has been no official census in Lebanon since 1932, but the Shi'ite community is widely believed to have become the largest of the country's 18 officially recognized confessional groups, constituting between 27 and 45 percent of Lebanon's 4.5 million people.[6] When prominent Shi'ite cleric Musa al Sadr came to Lebanon in 1959, he was the first to capitalize on the Shi'ites' demographic changes to advance the community's political rights.[7]

The Arrival of Musa al-Sadr

Until the late 1960s, a small number of wealthy Shi'ite families dominated the community's sociopolitical life through extensive patronage networks, and they did little to improve the living conditions of their community.[8] In the absence of a prominent Shi'ite religious party, many disgruntled young Shi'ites joined secular, leftist opposition organizations—such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Communist Party, and pro-Syrian and pro-Iraq factions of the Ba'ath Party—as well as various Palestinian militant factions operating on the Lebanese soil. In 1959, however, Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, the most senior Shi'ite leader in the Iraqi city of Najaf, sent Iranian-born cleric Musa al-Sadr to unite and lead the Shi'ite community in Lebanon.[9]

The arrival of al-Sadr changed the life of Lebanon's Shi'ite community in profound ways. The cleric astutely turned the Shi'ites' grievances into political activism, relegated the power of the traditional Shi'ite elites, and gave the Shi'ites a new political identity—encouraging his followers not to follow the Arab nationalism blindly but to strive for their own rights and political power.[10] In 1969, al-Sadr established the Shi'ite Supreme Islamic Council, and five years later, he united the fragmented Shi'ite communities in southern Lebanon and western Beirut under a new political movement, Harakat al-Mahrumin (Movement of the Deprived). When the civil war broke out in 1975, he created the organization's military wing, Afwaj al-Muqāwama al-Lubnāniyya (the Lebanese Resistance

Regiments, or Amal). In subsequent years, Amal military training camps in the south hosted not just Lebanese Shi'ites, but also Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi, and other Arab activists.[11]

In the late 1970s, many young Lebanese Shi'ite clerics and future Hezbollah leaders, such as Subhi al Tufayli and Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, escaped former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's crackdown and returned to Lebanon with a revolutionary goal of changing their societies through militant activity. Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who became the most influential Shi'ite leader in Lebanon after al-Sadr's mysterious disappearance in Libya in 1978, urged the returnee revolutionaries to join Amal and change the party from secularism to militarism.[12] Al-Sadr's disappearance, and the subsequent advent of the Iranian revolution and Israeli invasion, empowered radicals and sidelined the secular leaders of Amal—ultimately leading to the emergence of Hezbollah.[13]

Hezbollah: From a Proxy Militia to Political Ascendancy

Hezbollah (or Party of God) emerged in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon with Iranian support. The new revolutionary regime in Tehran saw Amal with suspicion: Amal's political leadership was predominantly secular and unwilling to serve as a proxy to further Iran's agenda in the region. It was against this backdrop that Tehran sought to create a more pliable organization that would emulate Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its religious and political leader and fight on Iran's behalf against the West and Israel.[14] Even today, it is "an obligation and commitment" for Hezbollah members to emulate current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while many non-Hezbollah Shi'ites in Lebanon are followers of Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.[15]

When a group of Amal revolutionaries came to Tehran for help in the wake of the Israeli invasion—including al-Musawi, Nasrallah, and Hezbollah's current deputy leader, Sheikh Naim Qassem—Khomeini welcomed the opportunity and gave the visiting delegation financial resources and his blessing. Soon, Khomeini dispatched a contingent of 1,500 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards

Corps (IRGC) to Lebanon to assist Hezbollah in its confrontation with Israel. With Syria's approval, the IRGC set up training camps in Lebanon's western Beqaa Valley. Even though Khomeini stopped further dispatch of IRGC forces because of logistical problems amidst the war with Iraq, Iran's financial and military aid continued to flow into Lebanon.[16]

Indeed, Iranian leaders proudly take credit for Hezbollah's creation. According to Hossein Sheikh al-Islam, a veteran Iranian diplomat, the IRGC's Intelligence Directorate (which later became the Quds Force) and the Iranian Embassy in Damascus played an instrumental role in the creation and organization of Hezbollah.[17] Iranian revolutionaries were active in Lebanon long before the 1979 revolution, and many of them who had trained in Amal and PLO military camps later became leaders of the IRGC. For example, Mohsen Rafiqdost, who became the minister of the IRGC after the revolution, had trained in the Beqaa Valley with the PLO, and after the revolution, he personally "organized" the training of Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon.[18] Former Iranian ambassadors to Damascus Ali Akbar Mohtashemi (1982–86) and Mohammad Hassan Akhtar (1986–97 and 2005–07) have also acknowledged their role as Hezbollah's "spiritual father" (*al-ab al-rouhi*) and "field father" (*al-ab al-midani*), respectively.[19]

Another senior IRGC commander who oversaw Hezbollah's operations in the early 1980s, including the 1983 US Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, was Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan, whom Iranian President Hassan Rouhani appointed as his minister of defense last August.[20] Speaking at a memorial service last December in Tehran for Hassan al-Laqees, a senior Hezbollah commander who was gunned down last month near Beirut, Dehghan acknowledged the IRGC's role: "Martyred Sayyid Abbas Musawi and Hassan al-Laqees were among the individuals trained by IRGC forces."[21] When Dehghan served as the commander of IRGC's training mission in Lebanon in the wake of the Israeli invasion, al-Laqees was his most senior aide.

While IRGC officials advised Hezbollah militants on the field, key decisions about Hezbollah's leadership and its mission were made

in the Iranian cities of Tehran and Qom. When Hezbollah leader al-Musawi was killed in 1992, Khamenei sent a delegation headed by his confidant Ahmad Jannati, currently the chairman of Iran's Guardian Council, to Lebanon to appoint Nasrallah the new secretary general for Hezbollah.[22]

Although Hezbollah's stated primary goal was to fight Israel, the militant group launched a campaign of terror in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut to subdue rival factions, especially members of the Community Party and Amal's secular leadership.[23] On Iran's order, Hezbollah also embarked on a campaign of terrorist attacks against Western targets. In almost-simultaneous attacks in October 1983, Hezbollah bombers killed 241 US Marine peacekeepers and 58 French troops.[24] The subsequent pullout of American and French troops after the bombings consolidated Iran's influence in Lebanon and paved the ground for a regional Shi'ite alliance of Iran-Syria-Hezbollah against not only the West and Israel, but also the regional Sunni Arab monarchies.

Today, Hezbollah is no longer a simple Iranian militant proxy, however. Under two decades of Nasrallah's leadership, Hezbollah has transformed into Lebanon's single most powerful military and political force: it dominates Lebanese politics and holds a veto power in parliament, its militia force is stronger and better equipped than the Lebanese Armed Forces, it runs a media empire for propaganda and indoctrination purposes, and it implements an extensive social welfare program in Beirut and Shi'ite-dominated areas across the country with Iranian aid. In addition, while Hezbollah continues to receive about $200 million annually from Iran, it has diversified its sources of income by engaging in licit and illicit businesses at home and running a criminal enterprise abroad, including in the United States and Latin America.[25]

Since Hezbollah outlined its first manifesto in 1985, its core ideological and political objectives have largely remained unchanged, but the group has adopted a more pragmatic platform to achieve its goals. Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah rejected the legitimacy of the established political system in Lebanon and called for the creation of an Islamic state in the country; however, after the 1989 Taif

Agreement that ended the civil war, Tehran and Damascus encouraged Hezbollah to enter the political arena to reform the system from within.[26] Senior Hezbollah members initially questioned the legitimacy and merits of entering politics, and al-Tufayli, Hezbollah's founder, abandoned the party in protest.[27]

At the end, Hezbollah's 12-member committee agreed that "the sum of pros outweighs the cons" and decided in favor of the move—arguing that participation in the government would help Hezbollah use parliament as "a political podium" to strengthen "resistance"; increase interaction with other sectarian groups; and enhance the organization's stature domestically, regionally, and internationally.[28] Hezbollah contested the 1992 parliamentary elections, winning 8 of the 128 seats, and it has participated in all subsequent elections, achieving a consistent degree of electoral success.[29]

Hezbollah's political clout gained a significant boost in 2008, when it militarily won a veto power over government decisions as part of the Doha Agreement. Hezbollah's showdown with the government initially began in 2006, when the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance began staging a series of protests in opposition to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government. In May 2008, the 18-month political crisis turned violent after the government tried to dismantle Hezbollah's secret communications network and remove the security chief of Beirut Airport over alleged ties to Hezbollah—measures that Nasrallah called a "declaration of war" against his party and demanded that the government retract them. "Those who try to arrest us, we will arrest them. Those who shoot at us, we will shoot at them. The hand raised against us, we will cut it off," he warned.[30]

When the government ignored Nasrallah's threats, Hezbollah militants seized control of several western Beirut neighborhoods in street battles that left more than 100 dead and injured. With the Lebanese Army staying on the sidelines, allegedly to preserve its neutrality, militias loyal to the March 14 coalition were no match for Hezbollah's heavily armed fighters. Besieged in their offices by Hezbollah militants, government leaders finally backed down; their parliamentary majority counted for little when Hezbollah decided to settle the discord militarily. On May 21, 2008, all rival factions

reached a compromise with the Doha Agreement to end the violence and form a national unity government.

The accord resulted in a significant shift of power in favor of Hezbollah and its political allies and highlighted the rising power of Iran and Syria at the expense of Lebanon's stability and American interests in the region. Both the US and Lebanese governments said the compromise was necessary, as the alternative would have been an all-out war. "We avoided civil war," said Walid Jumblatt, a leader of the ruling March 14 coalition.[31] US Assistant Secretary of State David Welch echoed a similar note: "It's not perfect as a solution, but you have to weigh it against the alternative."[32]

Hezbollah's military and political triumph also demonstrated the failure of US efforts to strengthen the Lebanese state institutions and marginalize Hezbollah. When the crisis began, the Bush administration pushed the Siniora government to resist Hezbollah's threats, but Washington ultimately failed to provide the government with political and military support to compete with Hezbollah's Iran-funded arsenal.[33]

Western optimism about the prospect of peace in Lebanon in the wake of the Doha Agreement was premature. Even though the deal brought a lull in violence, it did not address the underlying reasons that provoked the crisis. Most importantly, the issue of disarmament of Hezbollah was postponed, and since then, the group has leveraged its rising power to undermine successive governments.

In January 2011, for example, Hezbollah brought down the government of Saad al-Hariri after the latter pledged to cooperate with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigation into the 2005 assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.[34] Najib Miqati, a Sunni millionaire businessman who succeeded Saad Hariri, was a Hezbollah choice, and Miqati's June 2011 cabinet was dominated by the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance. In March 2013, however, Hezbollah forced the resignation of Miqati in a dispute over the extension of the term of Internal Security Forces (ISF) head, Major General Ashra Rifi, and the establishment of a special committee to oversee the upcoming elections. In light of the "political deadlock and the civil war in neighboring Syria," Lebanese

lawmakers agreed to postpone the June 2013 parliamentary elections until November 2014.[35]

As Hezbollah's political and military clout grows, more non-Shi'ite leaders are likely to join the Hezbollah-led coalition for political survival. In the 2011 government crisis, for instance, Walid Jumblatt, head of the Druze-led Progressive Socialist Party and a historically strong critic of Hezbollah and Syria, switched his allegiance from the March 14 to the March 8 coalition to help Hezbollah overcome the stalemate.[36] Since 2005, the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance has also included the Free Patriotic Movement, the largest Lebanese Christian party, led by former army general Michel Aoun.

Iran's Soft-Power Influence in Lebanon

Hezbollah's rise to military and political supremacy in Lebanon would not have been possible without Iranian support. Just two years after the 2006 war, Western and Israeli officials admitted that Iran had rearmed Hezbollah and that the group's stockpile was even bigger and deadlier than it was prewar.[37] Iranian officials, too, are not shy about claiming credit. Boasting about Hezbollah's growing military capabilities on January 11, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the IRGC's aerospace division, said, "Hezbollah's capability has improved so tremendously in recent years that it can hit and destroy any target in the occupied lands (Israel) with very little inaccuracy and [with] pinpoint ability."[38]

However, while Iran's financial and military assistance to Hezbollah often make headlines, Iranian soft-power efforts aimed at promoting Tehran's ideological and political agenda in Lebanon are largely overlooked. Through a variety of cultural, educational, religious, and reconstruction projects, Tehran aims to justify its presence and influence in Lebanon, promote Iranian culture there, enhance the image of Hezbollah, and incite anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments among the Lebanese people, particularly the Shi'ite community. The weakness of Lebanon's state institutions, coupled with indifference of the United States and its allies to address the grievances of the Lebanese Shi'ites, has allowed Tehran

to function as the sole benefactor for the Lebanese Shi'ites over the past three decades.

More importantly, Iranian charity and cultural organizations provide a civilian cover for the IRGC's secretive Quds Force operatives in Lebanon and Syria. In addition to the Iranian Embassy in Beirut, three prominent Iranian state-run organizations coordinate the Islamic Republic's soft-power efforts in Lebanon.

Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon. The Iranian government established the ICRL after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war to support Hezbollah's reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon. In August 2008, the United States Department of Treasury designated the ICRL as a terrorist entity because it "financed and facilitated Hizballah's infrastructure and private communications network that enables the terrorist group to communicate securely," and "has provided funding and engineering expertise to Hizballah's construction arm, Jihad al-Binaa," which was designated by Treasury in February 2007.[39]

While the ICRL's stated mission is to help Lebanon's rebuilding, in reality, it is a branch of the Quds Force in Lebanon camouflaged as a civilian organization. Hessam Khoshnevis, who directed the ICRL since 2006 until his assassination in Syria last February, was a senior Quds Force commander disguised as a civilian. Khoshnevis, whose real name was Hassan Shateri, played an instrumental role in rebuilding Hezbollah's military infrastructure and communication network after the 2006 conflict.

In February 2013, Hassan Hijazi, a senior Hezbollah official who worked closely with Shateri on reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon, said Shateri had implemented 5,480 construction and rebuilding projects in Lebanon, including 168 educational centers, 36 mosques, and 18 hospitals and health clinics.[40] According to former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani Sadr, Tehran spent around $1 billion on reconstruction projects in southern Lebanon between 2006 and 2010.[41] Not all of ICRL's reconstruction work has been for humanitarian reasons, however. In fact, Hezbollah's secret fiber optics network, which triggered the 2008 crisis in Lebanon, was

built with the "participation in the field" of the ICRL.[42]

Several other Iranian-Hezbollah joint organizations also carry out reconstruction and aid projects for Hezbollah fighters. The Iranian Institute for Martyrs, for example, provided families of Hezbollah militants who had died in the 2006 war with an apartment in south Beirut worth approximately $35,000, a monthly stipend, and a free pilgrimage to Mecca. The Shi'ite Amal party, in contrast, only offers employment opportunities for families of "martyrs."[43]

Imam Khomeini Relief Committee in Lebanon. Ostensibly an ordinary charity organization, the IKRC is part of the Iranian regime's larger soft-power network aimed at restraining dissent at home and expanding its political and ideological agenda abroad. While the charity and its assets are under the control of Iran's supreme leader, IKRC works in close partnership with and provides civilian cover for the IRGC, Basij, and Quds Force inside and outside Iran. Most of IKRC's $2 billion annual budget comes from the government, and about 25 percent is provided by public donations at home and fund-raising activities abroad.

The Quds Force and the Basij Sazendagi Sepah-e Pasdaran (Construction Basij of Revolutionary Guards) implement joint projects with the IKRC, recruit thousands of members for the organization, and provide direct funding for its projects.[44] IKRC operates in many countries, including Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Comoros, Syria, and Palestinian territories.[45] According to the organization's head, Hossein Anvari, IKRC's goal is not merely to do charity work, but also to export Iranian culture and Iran's model of Islamic governance. "The Islamic Republic of Iran benefits a great deal from IKRC's diplomacy, which is indeed defensive diplomacy," Anvari explains, adding that IKRC's mission has opened a "new chapter in the country's diplomacy," which aims to "to neutralize threats against the Islamic Republic."[46]

In Lebanon, the IKRC initially began operations in Beirut in 1986 and was registered as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization four years later, with the help of some Lebanese lawmakers. According to Hossein Hojaj, vice president for civic participation of IKRC in

Lebanon, the organization has over 10,000 Lebanese families under direct payroll, and more than 1,000 Lebanese individuals work with IKRC on "voluntary" or "probationary" basis. As part of Iran's efforts to win hearts and minds, the Lebanese branch provides social services in more than 400 cities and rural regions in Lebanon and has 20 offices and institutions in the country.[47]

IKRC's aid programs in Lebanon include cash assistance, health services, educational programs, housing, informational trips for young Lebanese to Iran, emergency relief assistance at times of conflicts and natural disasters, interest-free loans, marriage assistance, and more. After the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, the IKRC raised 1 billion rials for rebuilding Shi'ite religious institutions destroyed by Israeli bombings.[48]

In contrast to IKRC's other foreign branches, which are run by Iranian officials, the Lebanon office is managed almost entirely by Hezbollah members. In August 2010, the US Department of the Treasury designated IKRC's Lebanon branch as a foreign terrorist organization for being owned or controlled by Hezbollah and for providing financial and material support to the group. The Treasury noted that the "IKRC has helped fund and operate Hizballah youth training camps, which have been used to recruit future Hizballah members and operatives." Nasrallah has acknowledged that IKRC is one of Hezbollah's institutions funded by Iran.[49]

The designation, however, has not affected the organization's fundraising and services in Lebanon. Conversely, the organization raised a record $20 million between March 2011 and March 2012 from its 100 fundraising centers across Lebanon, a significant increase from $13 million in the previous year.[50]

The Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beirut. In 1987 the newly established Iranian Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance opened the CCI in Beirut with the aim of elevating Hezbollah's popularity and depicting Iran as the "Vatican of Shiism" among Lebanese people.[51] Although sanctions have weakened Iran's economy, the CCI has no shortage of money: it pays $144,000 annually to lease a multistory building in Beirut and runs free cultural

and educational programs across the country. Indeed, the center has recently increased its Persian-language courses in Lebanese schools and universities; for example, it has introduced new language courses for 4,000 students at Al Mehdi schools and 50 students at Lebanon State University.[52]

In addition, the CCI supervises a chain of Iranian-funded schools, universities, and religious seminaries, mostly in Shi'ite-dominated regions. For example, the Islamic Azad University, which was inaugurated by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 and hosts more than 1 million students in its 350 branches inside and outside Iran, has branches in Beirut and al-Nabatieh cities.[53]

The CCI also coordinates with Iranian state and private television and radio channels to promote Tehran's propaganda in Lebanon. Iran's Arabic television channel Al-Alam has more than 100 employees in its Beirut office alone.[54] The Islamic Republic News Agency's Middle East and Africa News Desk is also based in the Lebanese capital, which supervises branch offices in Ankara, Damascus, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and Kuwait. Other Iranian television channels operating in Lebanon are Press TV and Al Kawthar satellite channel, which draw modest audiences mostly in Shi'ite Lebanese cities.[55] In addition, the CCI works in close partnership with Hezbollah's cultural department to implement joint projects and functions as a mediator between Lebanon's Shi'ite groups, including Hezbollah, and Iranian funding institutions.[56]

Moreover, with Iranian financial and technical assistance, Hezbollah has built a media empire, which promotes not just its own but also Iranian and Syrian propaganda in the Arab world and beyond. Hezbollah's expanding media network includes the Al-Manar television channel, Radio Nour, and about two dozen newspapers and websites. In addition, the organization uses social and new media tools such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and smartphone applications for information and indoctrination purposes.[57]

Al-Manar, which first began its terrestrial broadcasting on June 3, 1991, is now one of the most popular satellite television networks in the Middle East. The channel was removed from US airwaves in December 2004, when the Department of State added it to the

Terrorist Exclusion List.[58] Twenty months later, the Department of Treasury also listed al-Manar as a Specifically Designated Global Terrorist entity because the channel not just supported Hezbollah's fundraising and recruitment but also provided financial aid to designated Palestinian terrorist entities, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Nasrallah and Hezbollah's Executive Council manage and oversee the budgets of al-Manar and al-Nour.[59] The channel is also banned in several other countries around the globe, including in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Australia, and Bahrain.

The ban has not prevented Hezbollah's media arm from reaching a global audience, however. To bypass the limitations, Hezbollah has stepped up activity in cyberspace, operating more than 20 websites in seven different languages. Recently, the group has added websites in Azeri and Spanish to expand its audience in Azerbaijan and Latin American countries. According to a report by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Hezbollah uses front individuals and companies to run its websites and changes Internet service providers frequently to prevent the US and European authorities from identifying and shutting down its websites.[60]

Syria's Sectarian War Spilling Over into Lebanon

Hezbollah's risky intervention in Syria has deepened Shi'ite-Sunni tension in Lebanon and threatens to plunge the country into yet another civil war. For the first two years of the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah denied fighting alongside President Bashar al-Assad's forces. On April 30, however, after separate meetings with Ayatollah Khamenei and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Nasrallah openly declared war in Syria and urged his followers to not "let Syria fall in the hands of America, Israel, or Takfiri (radical Sunni) groups." Soon, he dispatched hundreds of his militia-men to help President al-Assad's forces to retake the city of Qusayr, a rebel stronghold in western Syria close to the Lebanese border. On May 25, an emboldened Nasrallah hailed the Qusayr victory and vowed to continue fighting in Syria, warning that the survival of Shi'ites and

Lebanon was at stake: "This battle is ours. . . . Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the resistance cannot sit idly by while its back is being broken."[61]

Although Hezbollah succeeded in turning the tide of war in favor of the Syrian regime, the group's sectarian adventurism has provoked a deadly backlash from the Sunnis inside and outside Lebanon. Over the past year, tit-for-tat bombings, street clashes, kidnappings, assassinations, and rocket attacks by rival Sunni and Shi'ite factions have become routine in Lebanon's largest cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. On December 27, a car bomb in downtown Beirut killed Mohamad Chatah, a former Lebanese finance minister and a fierce critic of Hezbollah and Iranian and Syrian policies in Lebanon, who was reportedly a frontrunner to become Lebanon's next prime minister.[62] In other episodes of terrorism, al Qaeda-linked groups have carried out bombings and suicide attacks against the Iranian Embassy and the Iranian cultural center in Beirut, as well as against several Hezbollah targets across the country.

Hezbollah's militarism at home and sectarian policies abroad have also radicalized Lebanon's Sunni community, which feels increasingly isolated from the Hezbollah-dominated political system. The Sunni community has yet to recover from the assassination of its influential leader Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Hariri's son, Saad Hariri, who assumed leadership of the Sunni community as the head of Free Future Movement, lives in France for security reasons and has lost authority—leaving a vacuum that is being filled by radical Sunni groups with ties to al Qaeda.

For example, Ahmad Assir, a Salafist and previously a marginal cleric from Sidon, has drawn increasing support from young Lebanese Sunnis by capitalizing on rising anti-Shi'ite sentiment in the country. Portraits of Hariri and other moderate leaders in some Sunni neighborhoods are being replaced by the black flag representing the global al Qaeda franchise.[63] Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have both declared war on Lebanon and set up extremist cells in Sunni regions.[64] The Sunni community is also increasingly becoming distrustful of state

institutions, including the Lebanese Army, perceived by some Sunnis to be siding with Hezbollah.[65]

Intervention in Syria may also bear political costs for Hezbollah. In the past three decades, Hezbollah, similar to its Iranian mentor, has portrayed itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause and the archenemy of Israel. The new mission, however, puts Hezbollah in a direct confrontation with a regional Sunni alliance, undermines the group's cross-sectarian rhetoric, and could cost Hezbollah support among non-Shi'ite Muslims inside and outside Lebanon.

At present, Hezbollah enjoys broad support among Lebanese Shi'ites and maintains its alliance with Christian and Druze partners; however, as Hezbollah gets entangled in the protracted Syrian civil war, long-term support from its Shi'ite constituency and non-Shi'ite political allies remains in doubt.[66] Some independent Lebanese Shi'ite leaders—such as the mufti of Tyre, Sayyed Muhammad Hassan al-Amin, and Supreme Shi'ite Islamic Council member Sayyed Hani Fahs—have already chastised Hezbollah's sectarian role in Syria and called on their coreligionists to side with the Syrian opposition against the al-Assad dictatorship.[67]

Despite the dangerous blowback, however, Nasrallah has so far remained defiant. "As long as the reasons (to fight in Syria) remain, our presence there will remain," he told thousands of supporters on November 14.[68] Both Hezbollah and Iran perhaps anticipated a strong Sunni backlash for their involvement in Syria, but they may also have calculated that the consequences of inaction were costlier. The loss of Damascus, Tehran's closest state ally, would degrade Iran's ability to project its power in the Levant region and the broader Middle East. In the past three decades, Iran has not just used Syria as a key corridor to supply arms to Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad, but has also leveraged its strategic alliance with Syria in its rivalry against Saudi Arabia and Israel.

For Hezbollah, the Syrian regime's survival is an existential need and perhaps outweighs other security and political costs. The Syrian conflict's outcome will have a great impact on Hezbollah's future: a clear victory by the al-Assad regime would empower Hezbollah and

further solidify the group's domination of Lebanon, whereas the fall of the Syrian regime would deny Hezbollah a crucial partner and a strategic lifeline for Iranian assistance.

What Is at Stake in Lebanon?

Notwithstanding its small size and population, Lebanon plays a significant role vis-à-vis regional stability and US geopolitical interests in the Middle East. In a meeting with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman in December 2009, President Barack Obama rightly said, "Obviously Lebanon is a critical country in a critical region, and we want to do everything that we can to encourage a strong, independent, and democratic Lebanon."[69] Since 2006, the US government has pledged over $1 billion in military and economic assistance to promote democracy in Lebanon and strengthen the country's security institutions.[70]

The growing political and security turmoil in Lebanon, however, demonstrates that US policy has largely failed and requires a reset. Hezbollah's political power is rising while the influence of the pro-West March 14 coalition is in decline, Hezbollah's expanding arsenal and alleged smuggling of advanced missiles from Syria risks another war with Israel, the Lebanese Armed Forces are not yet capable of maintaining security and policing the country's borders, al Qaeda-linked groups are gaining a foothold in Sunni regions of the country, and the spillover of Syria's sectarian conflict has pushed Lebanon to the brink of another civil war. Moreover, with Syria engrossed in its own internal strife and Washington's role in the Levant region shrinking, Iran has stepped up its hard- and soft-power efforts to fill the vacuum and has emerged as the most influential external actor in Lebanese affairs.[71]

The United States cannot afford to continue the status quo and ignore Lebanon's descent into chaos. A sovereign, secure, and democratic Lebanon is vital for regional stability and containment of US enemies in the region, namely Iran, Syria, and al Qaeda.

To promote stability in Lebanon, the United States and its allies need to adopt a multifaceted strategy that counters Iranian influence

and strengthens Lebanese state institutions, primarily the Lebanese Armed Forces and the ISF. Above all, the Obama administration must partner with moderate leaders from all Lebanese ethnic and religious groups, including the Shi'ites, to contain and marginalize Hezbollah. Indeed, leaked US diplomatic cables from the Beirut Embassy indicate that American diplomats have done little to empower and work with independent Lebanese Shi'ite leaders who oppose Hezbollah and Iranian and Syrian policies in Lebanon. Until Hezbollah is disarmed, Lebanon will continue to be on the edge of anarchy and violence.

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Are Bahraini Shi'ites Puppets of Iran?

MICHAEL RUBIN

Bahrain, the smallest Arab country, is on the frontlines of the Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian divide. It is a diverse country, home not only to Muslims but also to an indigenous Christian and Jewish population. While the Bahraini royal family, security forces, and much of the business elite are Sunni, the majority of the population is Shi'ite. Indeed, Bahrain may have the highest proportion of Shi'ites among any Arab country, surpassing even Iraq. Political sensitivities make an exact census impossible, but what is clear is that the country's Sunni minority monopolizes power.

With the eruption of sectarian unrest on February 14, 2011, concerns regarding Bahrain's stability and the degree to which the Islamic Republic of Iran influenced Bahrain's Shi'ite population shot to the forefront. Bahraini Shi'ite opposition leaders reject as sectarian slander the Bahraini government's accusations that they are under Iran's thumb; instead, they say they seek to reverse discrimination and address specific grievances related to employment, housing, and equality. Bahraini security officials, however, say that Iran permeates, if not directs, the protests, and caution foreign diplomats not to be naïve. They warn that meaningful reform would usher in a period of Iranian domination. The reality is that there is truth to both sides.

Bahrain's Failed Islamic Revolution

Bahraini Shi'ites bristle at the notion that they harbor dual loyalty. In 1970, as the British prepared to pull their forces back from East of Suez, the shah of Iran asserted a centuries-old claim to Bahrain, based on the fact that Iran had ruled Bahrain until the 16th century

when the Portuguese seized the island. Bahraini Shi'ites correctly point out that, had they really wished to be part of Iran, they had every opportunity to seek unity during a 1970 UN-sponsored survey. Instead, they joined the overwhelming majority of Bahraini Sunnis, Christians, and Jews in choosing independence. The shah renounced Iran's claims and, in 1971, Bahrain became independent.

Political discord marred the island nation's first years. Bahrainis elected a parliament in 1973 without a hitch. What the emir did not expect, however, was that that parliament would become a source for discontent. Ironically, at the time, the ruling family feared Sunni dissent more than Shi'ite unrest.[1] Nasserism was sweeping across the Middle East, threatening to push out traditional Arab monarchies.

The parliament demanded full implementation of the constitution, something the Khalifa family felt might hamper its control. By 1975, the tension grew too great for the royal family's tolerance, as the parliament refused to endorse measures that would have enabled arrest without charge of opposition elements. The royal family disbanded the parliament and refused new elections to replace it.

The real trouble started in the years that followed, and came not from the Nasserist wave in the west but from the once-stable east. Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini sought to promote his ideology well beyond Iran's borders. Among the first countries in his site was Bahrain. Khomeini may have believed Bahrain susceptible to his brand of political Islam for several reasons: During his long years of exile, he taught in the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf, Iraq, where he interacted and, indeed, took as his students many Bahraini clerics. And political unrest started in Bahrain in 1978, around the same time Iran began its descent into chaos.

While Bahrain had been independent for less than a decade, the Khalifa family had dominated the island for centuries. With its own oil reserves depleted and British subsidies ended, Bahrain's standard of living was poor, at least relative to its Persian Gulf neighbors. What wealth did exist flowed disproportionately to the Sunni elite. Khomeini may have figured that Shi'ites may not have sought to

swap one king for another, but now that the shah was gone and an "Islamic paradise" implemented in his place, they might reconsider.

Khomeini was not willing to simply sit on the sidelines and wait for such a decision, however. Instead, he actively sought to export Iran's revolution. His chief tool was the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), a revolutionary Shi'ite group founded in 1976. It made no secret of its goal to topple the Khalifa family's rule and to replace it with an Islamic order led by Hadi al-Modaressi, an Iraqi ayatollah who had fled Saddam Hussein and taken refuge in Bahrain, at least until his 1979 expulsion.

Evidence that the IFLB was an Iranian puppet organization is overwhelming. The group declared its fidelity to the "Universal Islamic Revolution under the leadership of Imam Khomeini."[2] Between August 9 and 11, 1980, IFLB leadership held a conference in Tehran, at the conclusion of which they issued a statement declaring, "Imam Khomeini is the leader and axis around which our oppressed peoples should rally if they truly seek freedom, since Imam Khomeini is the summit of jihad and faith and the symbol of challenge and endurance. He is the hope of all the oppressed in the world."[3]

After Khomeini's victory in Iran, the IFLB declared Modaressi to be Khomeini's representative in Bahrain. IFLB publications openly talked about its members training with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps inside Iran.[4] In short, not only was the IFLB linked with Iran, but it also took its direction from Tehran.

On December 13, 1981, three days before the 10-year anniversary of Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa taking the throne, an anniversary that Bahrain marks as its National Day, Bahraini security forces arrested 73 people—most affiliated with the IFLB—whom they accused of planning a coup to overthrow the government and impose a Khomeini-style Islamic Republic on Bahrain. For most Bahrainis, the events of 1981 are ancient history. After all, the median age of Bahrain is just 31.4 years, which means that more than half of the population—those who are now protesting—were born and came of age after the Iranian-sponsored coup attempt. Nevertheless, for the royal family, that event remains in the forefront of their minds.

Unresolved Grievances

While some Bahraini Shi'ites committed treason in 1981, Bahraini government implications of communal guilt are unfair. Still, the coup attempt reinforced a sense of crisis that the Bahraini government used to justify the suspension of the constitution and parliament. By the early 1990s, however, the sense of immediate crisis had dissipated. Iran remained committed to revolutionary export, but the devastation of eight years of war with Iraq followed by the death of Ayatollah Khomeini had tempered Iran's aggression toward its neighbors.

It was against this backdrop that, in 1992, Bahrainis—again, many of them Sunni—petitioned the emir to restore the constitution and parliament. The emir rejected the petition but, two years later, the petitioners returned with 23,000 signatures. The exponential increase in signatories reflected the inclusion of Shi'ites, although the movement's leadership remained both secular and cross-sectarian.[5] Shi'ites joined the movement in order to protest their growing disenfranchisement.

Unemployment was overwhelmingly a Shi'ite phenomenon and, in June 1994, created a spark for growing protests that soon morphed into demands for the restoration of the parliament and constitution. Violence erupted and took a distinctly sectarian air after Bahraini authorities routed a marathon through the heart of Shi'ite villages, and protesters responded by throwing stones at immodestly dressed runners. Clashes—and an occasional bombing—continued periodically for several years. The political stalemate was broken only by the death (from natural causes) of Emir Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa in 1999.

Bahrainis long considered Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, who assumed the throne upon his father's death, to be a reformer; initially, he did not disappoint. He proposed a National Action Charter calling for the restoration of the parliament and constitutional order and guaranteeing both individual liberty and the supremacy of law over the ruler's whim. In a 2001 referendum, 98.4 percent of Bahrainis approved the charter, ending the seven-year period of instability and sectarian strife and enabling Bahrain a fresh start.

Alas, Hamad's actions as emir did not match his reformist rhetoric as crown prince. While he did restore parliament, he did not sacrifice power. Rather than implement the National Action Charter that he had proposed and negotiated, he declared himself "king" and took absolute power. This means he appoints both the prime minister—Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa has held that post since Bahrain's independence—and all 40 members of the Majlis al-Shura. Bahrainis then elect a second, 40-member council of representatives. Whereas in the United States, decennial censuses equalize electoral districts in terms of population, no such system exists in Bahrain. The kingdom gerrymanders districts to ensure Sunni dominance. The hopes Bahrain's Shi'ite majority placed in Hamad's good faith were not met, and the king did not address their fundamental grievances.

This set the stage for a perfect storm in 2011. Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010 and subsequent death early the next month set off a series of protests that swept through the region, ousting some of the Arab world's most retrenched dictators, most notably Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Against this backdrop, Bahrainis called for a Day of Rage on February 14, 2011, a date that coincided with the 10th anniversary of the National Action Charter referendum. Shi'ite Bahrainis used the occasion to protest their mistreatment and demanded a new constitution drafted jointly by Shi'ites and Sunnis, the release of Shi'ite prisoners, and an end to torture.[6]

Bahraini forces, allegedly under the control of hardline Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, responded with an iron fist, killing one protester. As often happens across the region, his funeral catalyzed further protests that in turn led to additional casualties. On February 17, 2011, a police operation reportedly wounded 95 protesters.[7] A subsequent release of political prisoners did not lessen tensions, as new grievances mounted more quickly than the government resolved past ones.

What began as a peaceful protest morphed into a movement that shook the foundations of Bahraini stability and ultimately led, after a

month, to a heavy-handed police and military intervention by a predominantly Saudi-manned Gulf Cooperation Council force. Within a month, more than 30 Bahraini protesters died.[8]

This Peninsula Shield deployment may have restored a modicum of order, but it did not restore calm. Violence and midnight protests continued to rock the island nation for months. To deny protesters a rallying point, Bahraini authorities destroyed downtown Manama's Pearl Monument, the Bahraini equivalent of Washington Monument and the site of the initial protests. To extract an economic price for Bahraini repression and to keep their movement in the headlines, protesters subsequently targeted international forums hosted by Bahrain. Formula 1, for example, cancelled the Bahrain Grand Prix in March 2011, and protests and tear gas marked subsequent Grand Prixes.

In the wake of the Pearl Monument uprising, King Hamad called for an inquiry. He appointed Egyptian American legal scholar Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni to head the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate the events of February and March 2011.[9] The final report of the Bassiouni Commission, as it became popularly known, put to rest doubts about its independence, finding that Bahraini security forces used excessive force and torture and found no evidence to support the government's allegation that Iran was behind the protests.[10] Many opposition activists, however, said the report did not go far enough because it failed to directly blame, let alone hold accountable, senior officials.[11]

While King Hamad quickly pledged reforms to expand the power and independence of parliament, many of the commission's recommendations have yet to be implemented.[12] This may be due in part to factional divisions within the royal family. Despite his seeming engagement in the weeks after the Pearl Monument uprising and his role in creating the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, foreign diplomats describe the king as more interested in leisure and the perks of power than the hard work of governance. He cedes many decisions to his uncle, the hardline prime minister. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad has urged greater reforms, but does not have the power to implement them.

Regardless, both sides have retrenched in their positions. The government seems more interested in defeating the opposition than in addressing any legitimate grievances it might have. In July 2013, for example, Bahraini lawmakers ramped up new "counterterrorism laws" that empower the government to strip Bahraini protesters of their citizenship.[13] The opposition is not blameless. While many tell Western journalists and diplomats that they are committed to peaceful reform and a constitutional monarchy, many privately suggest what they will not say publicly: that they seek to end the monarchy and to oust Americans from the island.[14]

Indeed, graffiti calling for Hamad's downfall is ubiquitous in Manama, reapplied as quickly as security forces can whitewash urban walls. Nor are opposition forces likely to put their faith in the future. Many point out that they had trusted Hamad's pronouncements when he was crown prince, only to see him repeatedly fail to implement reforms. They are therefore unwilling to put stock in Crown Prince Salman's promises, and see the factional discord that American diplomats tend to emphasize as an elaborate case of good cop, bad cop, designed to fool credulous foreigners.

A Hidden Iranian Hand?

Despite the Bassiouni Commission's findings, however, Bahraini authorities continue to blame the most recent violence on Iran. Are they right? Perhaps. Just because Iranian officials did not cause the initial unrest does not mean that they have not sought to exploit it. Senior Iranian officials continue to claim Iranian suzerainty over Bahrain.

In 2007, for example, Hossein Shariatmadari, Ali Khamenei's appointee to edit the hardline state daily *Kayhan*, labeled Bahrain as Iran's historical 14th province.[15] On February 3, 2012, Khamenei used his Friday prayer sermon to castigate the Bahraini monarchy, even as he declined responsibility for the uprising.[16] That said, even if Khamenei's denials are to be taken at face value—a dangerous prospect given the numerous mistruths in which Khamenei and his regime have been caught—Iranian soft power is significant.[17]

Iranian media influence among Bahraini Shi'ites is extensive. Taxi drivers, businessmen, students, and political activists all say they get their news from Iran's Arabic-language Al-Alam service or, when that is jammed, from Voice of Iran. Iran's Press TV and Sahar are also popular. That such outlets have a wide audience in Bahrain does not necessarily correlate with support, however. Rather, through an extensive network of local Shi'ite stringers wielding cell phones and cameras, the Arabic-language Iranian channels simply provide more extensive coverage of Bahraini political and religious news than do the heavily censored Bahraini state press or Western Arabic-language.

Iran's attempts to influence public opinion are not simply passive. In Manama's religious books stores, one can buy posters not only of Isa Qassim—the leading Bahraini cleric and spiritual mentor of al-Wifaq, the main Shi'ite opposition group—but also of Khamenei, Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, and Imad Mughniyeh, mastermind of the 2003 attack on the Marine Barracks in Beirut and, two years later, the hijacking of TWA 847. And Hezbollah's al-Manar satellite station and media company has produced CDs with mainstream Shi'ite opposition leader Ali Samad's speeches set to religious music.

Iran may also retain disproportionate influence on Bahrain's Shi'ite religious hierarchy. In the early 1980s, Iranian authorities established the al-Athar Theological Seminary in Qom to focus on educating Bahraini theological students; Iran's interest in Bahraini students was not altruistic. Until that point, most Bahraini religious scholars had studied in Najaf. Khomeini, however, hoped to remodel Shi'ite theology to conform to his own minority views regarding clerical rule.

Qassim embodies this pattern: he spent several years studying in Najaf in the 1960s but then, in 1991, moved to Qom to complete his studies and become an ayatollah.[18] He was not alone. Because of Iraqi President Saddam's repression of Iraqi Shi'ites and his regime's tight control over Najaf and Karbala, generations of Bahraini religious students, from the 1970s until Saddam's 2003 fall, had little choice but to study in Qom. Just because Iranian authorities sought to impose Khomeini's vision there does not mean all students accepted his word. Nevertheless, over years of residence and study, many would absorb Iranian influence, even if unconsciously.

Regardless of where Bahraini clerics study, the Shi'ite landscape in Bahrain is complex. As elsewhere, most Bahraini Shi'ites look toward Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as their source of religious guidance; Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is increasingly popular, though, and the office of the late ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, perhaps the closest thing to a spiritual leader that Lebanese Hezbollah had, remains active in Bahrain. While Fadlallah died in 2010 and, theoretically, Shi'ites should transfer their allegiance to a living source of emulation, Fadlallah's office still collects religious taxes, perhaps as a proxy for other groups.

Money also drives rebellions and fuels revolutions. According to Iranian diplomats who engage Westerners, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leaders make no secret that they see export of the revolution as a military phenomenon and not a matter for soft power.[19] Opposition can be expensive, if only in subsidizing and feeding those unemployed because of the unrest or the family members of those killed.

While some Bahraini opposition activists acknowledge receiving aid from the offices of ayatollahs based in Iraq and perhaps in Iran, Bahraini government officials suggest that Bahrain's role as a center of international finance enables Iranian authorities to fund the opposition. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps maintains a multibillion-dollar network of civilian front companies, some of which might have multimillion-dollar accounts in Bahraini banks. If Bahraini figures can draw on the interest from such accounts, the accounts could essentially serve as endowments for revolution. This puts Bahraini government officials between a rock and a hard place: to crack down on these accounts could precipitate a run on Bahraini banks and worsen the financial crisis that already afflicts the island.

Even if Western officials—and the Bassiouni Commission—concluded that the initial Bahraini uprising did not bear Iranian fingerprints, it would be dangerous to assume that Iranian authorities will permanently refrain from interference. On December 30, 2013, Bahraini authorities announced that they had intercepted a ship carrying Iranian explosives and weaponry apparently destined for the Bahraini opposition, while a simultaneous raid uncovered an illegal

weapons depot along the Budaiya highway, which connects many of the Shi'ite villages to Manama.[20]

The Iranian government, for its part, rejected the Bahraini accusations.[21] Hossein AmirAbdollahian, Iran's deputy foreign minister for African and Arab affairs, dismissed the Bahraini charges and said that Bahrain had no one to blame but itself for its domestic woes. Nevertheless, as the Iranian economy improves against the backdrop of sanctions relief and renewed international investment, Iranian authorities will have greater cash at their disposal with which to foment unrest and sponsor revolution, a central ideological pillar of the Iranian regime.[22]

Conclusion

Bahrain's unrest has deep roots, and Bahraini Shi'ites have legitimate grievances that have nothing to do with Iran. The Bahraini government's inability or unwillingness to seriously address the problems facing its Shi'ite community creates fertile ground not only for legitimate protest, but also for those who seek to eliminate Bahrain's monarchy or subordinate Bahraini sovereignty to Iran.

King Hamad and Prime Minister Khalifa reject substantive reform in the belief that Saudi Arabia would never allow the opposition to triumph. Meanwhile, they seek to change Bahrain's sectarian demography by offering citizenship to Pakistani, Yemeni, Jordanian, and Iraqi Sunnis in exchange for significant investment or service in Bahrain's sectarian security forces. Such a strategy is not only as corrosive to Bahrain's identity as Iranian suzerainty would be, but it also condemns Bahrain to perpetual unrest, as dispossessing more than two-thirds of its population is not a formula for economic success or security.

That said, even if the current unrest does not derive from Iranian malfeasance, Bahraini authorities and Western diplomats would be foolish to assume that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps does not have designs on the island as it did in 1981. Indeed, a generational pattern may be at play.

While young Bahraini Shi'ites may genuinely believe they are fighting for basic civil rights, their leaders from the 1981 generation

may simply be withholding their true goals as they channel younger protesters into a conflict that those leaders might use to overthrow the monarchy. Here, the fact that even legal Shi'ite political parties such as al-Wifaq cannot identify any issues on which they disagree with Ayatollah Isa Qassim should be a warning sign for those inclined to believe the opposition's democratic rhetoric.

Violence may no longer be occurring nightly, but neither the Bahraini government nor its Western allies should confuse quiet with calm. Until Bahraini Shi'ites see opportunity and equality under the law, Bahrain will remain a tinderbox. At the same time, it behooves the Bahraini opposition to be especially careful should the Iran seek to open a new chapter in Bahraini unrest, for any attempt by Iran to co-opt the movement will delegitimize the Bahraini opposition and their struggle for reform, for decades to come.

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Saudi Arabia's Forgotten Shi'ite Spring

AHMAD K. MAJIDYAR

For decades the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been America's indispensable ally in the Middle East, and the Kingdom's stability remains vital for US strategic interests in the region. While antigovernment protests in the Kingdom's Sunni-majority regions have been small and sporadic in the wake of Arab Spring, there has been an unremitting unrest in the strategic Eastern Province, home to Saudi Arabia's marginalized Shi'ite minority and major oil fields. As in the 1980s, if government repression and discrimination push the Shi'ites to extremes, some may resort to violence and terrorism, jeopardizing American interests in the region, benefitting Iran and al-Qaeda, disrupting the equilibrium of global oil markets, and adversely affecting economic recovery in the West. To ensure lasting stability in the Kingdom, the United States must work with the Saudi government to achieve gradual but meaningful reforms that include integrating the Shi'ites into the Kingdom's sociopolitical system.

While Shi'ites constitute only about 10 to 15 percent of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's population of 28 million, their geographical location in the oil-rich Eastern Province makes them strategically important for the government.[1] The Shi'ite majority region is the largest of the country's 13 administrative areas and contains almost one-fifth of the world's proven oil reserves. Saudi Aramco, the biggest energy company in the world and the backbone of the Kingdom's economy, is also located in the province and Shi'ites make up more than half of its workforce.[2] The region is likewise prone to foreign interference as it is the closest to the three Persian Gulf countries with Shi'ite majorities: Bahrain (65 to 75 percent), Iraq (65 to 70 percent), and Iran (90 to 95 percent).[3]

Most Shi'ites in the Eastern Province are adherents of Twelver Shi'ite Islam, with the biggest concentrations in the two large oases of Qatif and al-Hasa. There is also a small Twelver community in Medina called Nakhawila. In addition, about half a million Ismaili Shi'ites and several thousand Zaydi Shi'ites reside in the southwestern province of Najran, along the border with Yemen.[4] Unlike in Kuwait, Shi'ite communities in the Eastern Province do not have tribal and clan ties to Iran and Iraq, except for the Banu Tamim tribe.[5] However, the Saudi and Bahraini Shi'ite communities are linked by blood ties, as Qatif and al-Hasa were in the past part of greater Bahrain.[6]

The Shi'ites suffered immensely from Saudi Wahhabi violence during the military conquests of the eastern region in the 18th and 19th centuries.[7] When King Abdulaziz Al Saud, founder of modern Saudi Arabia, seized al-Hasa from the Ottoman rulers in 1913, Al Saud's radical Ikhwan army embarked on a vicious anti-Shi'ite rampage, calling for a jihad against the Shi'ites and asking Al Saud either to convert them or to permit killing them. When the king refused, the army acted unilaterally in 1926, massacring a great number of Shi'ites. The mass killings forced Al Saud to contain the Ikhwan by force, and Shi'ites were later tolerated when the Kingdom was unified in 1932.[8] Saudi Shi'ites, however, continue to be treated as second-class citizens, and sectarian tension in the Eastern Province has escalated since the Arab Spring.

Shi'ite Grievances in Saudi Arabia

Over the past century, the Shi'ites have suffered from high levels of religious discrimination, political exclusion, and economic deprivation. The Saudi state religion is Wahhabi-Hanbali Islam, which considers the Shi'ites heretics. Shi'ites are not allowed to build mosques or run *husseiniyas* (Shi'a places of worship and social gathering) in cities with mixed Sunni-Shi'ite populations, such as in Dammam and Khobar. While the government has allowed Shi'a courts in Shi'ite majority areas such as Qatif, the ministry of justice appoints judges without prior consultation with the local communities.

Saudi Shi'ites are also denied basic civil rights and are barred from senior positions in the government. At present, there is no single Shi'ite cabinet member, deputy minister, ambassador, head of a university, or even girls' school principal. Similar discriminatory policies exist in the private sector, where the ministry of interior strictly monitors the recruitment process for senior positions.[9]

Al Saud rulers have at times taken measures to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the Shi'ite communities, but most measures have been either inconsequential or short-lived. In his first month as king in 1975, Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al Saud declared an amnesty that allowed the return of many nationalist political activists—mainly leftists—from exile, including Shi'ite leaders, and the release of many political prisoners inside the Kingdom. A decade later, the government implemented a nationwide development plan benefitting the Shi'ite communities.

Moreover, after the 1993 reconciliation between Shi'ite leaders and the government, Shi'ites in Qatif were allowed to build mosques and publish religious books. But reforms soon stalled as King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became ill and his hawkish interior minister, Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, took charge of state affairs.[10]

The Rise of Political Shi'ism

Despite decades of state-sponsored discrimination and oppression, a majority of Saudi Shi'ites embraced quietism—focusing on religious education and shunning political activism—for much of the 20th century.[11] In the late 1950s, however, the government imposed a new set of religious restrictions on the Shi'ite communities, including the closure of offices of Shi'ite *marja'iyyas* (*Marja-i-Taqlids* or sources of emulation), which forced many Saudi Shi'ites to migrate to the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala for education or careers in religious affairs.[12] After the Iraqi government crackdown in 1973, several Shi'ites fled to Qom, Iran, among them Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the most prominent Saudi Shi'ite political figure and the architect of Shi'ite political activism in Saudi Arabia.[13]

Born in 1958 in Qatif, al-Saffar had been inspired by prominent

Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammed al-Shirazi since childhood, when he read al-Shirazi's books at his father's library. At age 13, al-Saffar moved to Najaf, and because al-Shirazi had left Iraq for Kuwait, al-Saffar enrolled in the *hawza* (traditional Shi'a center where clerics are trained) of Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei. After two years, al-Saffar moved to Qom, where he enrolled in the *hawza* of Sheikh Mohammed Kazem Shariatmadari (1904–85), then Iran's leading *marja'iyya* who later played an active role in the Islamic Revolution.

In 1974, al-Saffar moved to Kuwait and joined al-Shirazi and Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi, adopting a more political orientation. He studied at the Hawza of the Supreme Prophet and later became a preacher traveling across the Persian Gulf. During his frequent visits to Saudi Arabia, he recruited students who went to study at the Kuwaiti *hawza* and formed the next generation of Saudi religious scholars. Almost all the al-Shirazi clerical leadership in Saudi Arabia passed through the Hawza of the Supreme Prophet.[14] The followers of al-Saffar are, therefore, called *Shirazyyin*.

Uprising after Iran's Islamic Revolution

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, antigovernment activism among Saudi Shi'ites was not directed by religious leaders, but mostly manifested itself in the form of leftist movements such as Communism, Nasserism, and Baathism.[15] Moreover, Aramco had turned into a hub for leftist activities.[16] But this changed with the revolution, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's success and revolutionary rhetoric emboldened the Saudi Shi'ites and provided them with a new model for achieving their objectives.

Right after the Islamic Revolution, al-Saffar and other *Shirazyyin* leaders established the Organization of Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (IRO), mobilizing tens of thousands of supporters to protest against the government.[17] In November 1979, Shi'ite protesters defied a government ban on rituals of *Muharram* (first month of the Islamic calendar) and staged demonstrations, calling on the government to end discrimination, to stop supplying oil to the United States, and to support the Islamic Revolution.

The protests continued for four months, and the government arrested hundreds of activists. As a result, most of the leadership went into exile in Iran and later to the West. The *Muharram* violence marked a departure from the quietist atmosphere prevalent in the Kingdom and signaled a shift of power from traditionalist, quietist leaders to revolutionary-minded young activists led by al-Saffar and other *Shirazyyin*.[18]

While the Shi'ite uprising in the Eastern Province was mostly homegrown, the new government in Tehran launched an aggressive campaign to inflame the unrest. Radio Tehran's daily Arab-language programs, widely listened to in the Eastern Province, attacked not only the "United States, the bloodsuckers of peoples" but also the Saudi monarchy as a "corrupt, mercenary agent of the United States."[19] Khomeini's inflammatory audiocassettes were distributed among Saudi Shi'ites to propagate the Iranian leader's revolutionary message. Saudi Arabia—as the guardian of Muslims' holiest sites in Mecca and Medina—was of particular importance for Khomeini, who saw control of the Kingdom as a prerequisite to achieving leadership of the Islamic world.[20]

Saudi-Iranian relations were further strained during the annual *Hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca in 1982 and 1983 when Iranian pilgrims protested against American and Israeli policies, triggering a clash with the Saudi security forces and an expulsion of scores of Iranian citizens, including Khomeini's *Hajj* representatives Mohammad Musavi Khoiniha and Mehdi Karroubi.[21] Tension between the two countries reached its peak in 1987 when Saudi security forces killed hundreds of Iranian protesters during *Hajj*. Tehran and Riyadh severed diplomatic ties and Iran boycotted *Hajj* for the next three years.[22]

Iranian-Sponsored Terrorism: Hezbollah al-Hejaz

Khomeini strongly condemned the murder of Iranian pilgrims by the "treacherous heads of Saudi Arabia who are the lackeys of the United States," and many Iranian leaders vowed retaliation.[23] When moderate *Shirazzyin* leaders rejected Iranian dictates to engage in terrorism

and left Iran under pressure, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) worked with a group of radical Saudi Shi'ites to form a more pliant group to retaliate against the Saudi government.

Under the aegis of IRGC commander Ahmad Sharifi, Hezbollah al-Hejaz, also known as the Saudi Hezbollah, was established in 1987. New members were recruited not just in the Eastern Province but also in religious seminaries and military camps in Iran and Lebanon.[24] The clerical wing of Hezbollah al-Hejaz mostly came from Tajamu' 'Ulama' al-Hijaz operating out of the Hawza al-Hijaziyya (Hijazi seminary) in Qom. Like Khomeini, the group used the name al-Hejaz for Saudi Arabia to undermine the legitimacy of the Al Saud regime.[25]

A small number of *Shirazzyin* leaders also joined the group. After a meeting with IRGC officials in Syria, for example, Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Mughassil left the IRO and became the leader of the Saudi Hezbollah's military wing and began recruiting young activists in different villages and cities of the Eastern Province. With the help of the IRGC and agents within the Saudi oil installations, Hezbollah al-Hejaz launched a series of high-profile terrorist attacks inside the Kingdom, including the August 1987 attack at a gas plant and the March 1988 bombing of petrochemical installations at Ras Tanura and Jubail in the Eastern Province.[26]

After a government crackdown, most leaders escaped to Iran, Lebanon, and Syria and shifted their focus to targeting Saudi diplomatic installations abroad, conducting bomb attacks against Saudi embassies from Bangkok to Ankara.[27] After Khomeini's death in 1989 and the subsequent Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Tehran reportedly urged Hezbollah to freeze activities because of convergence of interests with Riyadh at that time.[28] The organization instead focused on media propaganda against the Saudi regime by opening publishing houses in Damascus and Beirut.[29]

Also called *Khat al-Imam* (the line of Imam Khomeini), Saudi Hezbollah's members emulate Khomeini and his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in religious and political affairs. *Shirazyyin*, on the other hand, are independent in their political activity and follow Iraq-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani and other

more moderate *marja'iyyas*. Saudi Hezbollah rejected the *Shirazyyin*'s reconciliation with the government, but many of its leaders benefited from the government's amnesty and returned home in the early 1990s.[30]

After a lull in violence and end of the First Gulf War, the group's militant wing began planning for operations to "remove U.S. forces from the Arabian Peninsula."[31] On June 25, 1996, the organization carried out a bomb attack against a housing complex in Al Khobar, Eastern Province, killing 19 Americans and wounding more than 300 people of different nationalities. Subsequent investigations found that senior Iranian government officials had "planned, funded, and sponsored" the Khobar Towers attacks.[32] The Saudi government executed or arrested many of the group's members and others fled to Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and the West. Four members of the organization remain on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most wanted terrorism list: Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Mughassil, Abdelkarim Hussein Mohamed Al-Nasser, Ibrahim Salih Mohammed Al-Yacoub, and Ali Saed Bin Ali El-Hoorie.[33]

From Confrontation to Accommodation

By the end of 1980s, a growing number of Saudi Shi'ite activists had recognized the limits of the revolution. Khomeini was dead and his revolution remained largely confined to Iran's borders. They therefore viewed accommodation with the government as a more realistic approach than confrontation to achieve reforms.[34] Furthermore, Shi'ite leaders in exile felt they were becoming increasingly detached from their communities at home, hence they renounced revolutionary rhetoric and adopted an agenda calling for democratization and human rights in the Kingdom.[35]

In 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the IRO broke ties with other Shi'ite organizations in the region and renamed itself the Reform Movement (*al-Harakat Islah*). "We condemned the attack and expressed readiness to defend our homeland—prompting King Fahd to send a delegation to meet us," al-Saffar acknowledged in an interview.[36]

In September 1993, a delegation of the Reform Movement arrived in Saudi Arabia and held meetings with senior government officials, including King Fahd and Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, the governor of the Eastern Province. As a result, the government granted the Shi'ite opposition a general amnesty and pledged to improve Shi'ites' sociopolitical conditions in the Kingdom. In return, the opposition agreed to cease antigovernment activism and returned home.[37]

In subsequent years, al-Saffar not only broadened his group's appeal within the Shi'ite communities but he also had some success in working with Sunni opposition movements. In 2003, Shi'ite and Sunni opposition groups bridged the sectarian gap and launched a series of joint petitions for reform such as the "Vision for the Present and Future of the Country."[38]

The joint efforts paid off as King Abdullah initiated national dialogue conferences and held municipal elections in 2005. Turnout in the elections was significantly higher in the Eastern Province than in Sunni regions, a testament to the *Shirazzyin*'s ability to mobilize masses through informal networks and religious institutions. In Qatif, the *Shirazzyin* won four of the five seats, and in al-Hasa, they won three of the six seats that were opened for contest. Jafar Mohammad al-Shayeb, a prominent member of the Reform Movement, became the chairman of the municipal council in Qatif.[39]

The Arab Spring: Riyadh's Counterrevolution

In early 2011, soon after revolutionary protests broke out in the Arab world, the Saudi government initiated a four-pronged strategy to counter the emerging threat to its rule. This included 1) injecting $130 billion into the economy to create jobs, raise salaries, and provide subsidized housing; 2) arresting or co-opting opposition leaders; 3) taking counterrevolutionary measures to rescue friendly governments in the region, especially the Persian Gulf monarchies; and 4) playing the sectarianism card to depict the protest movement in the Eastern Province as an Iranian–Shi'a plot and to prevent its spread to the Sunni heartlands.[40]

The strategy achieved its political purpose, at least in the short run.

There was no Saudi Spring. Tens of thousands of Saudi activists—both Shi'ites and Sunnis—signed petitions on Facebook calling for a nationwide protest on March 11, 2011, dubbed the "Day of Rage."[41] But the day passed almost quietly as opposition groups failed to translate their online activism into street protests. Civil society institutions—legal political parties, youth associations, women's organizations, trade unions, or independent human rights organization—are largely nonexistent in Saudi Arabia. In the capital city of Riyadh, only one person showed up to protest and was immediately arrested.[42]

In the Eastern Province, however, hundreds of Shi'ite activists defied the government ban on demonstration and protested. Unlike in the early 1980s, however, protesters did not call for the overthrow of the regime, but for an end to discrimination, a release of political prisoners, support for uprising in Bahrain, and a fairer representation in the political power. Predictably, the Saudi interior minister vowed to crush the protests with an "iron fist" and unleashed an anti-Shi'ite media campaign to discredit the protesters as agents of Iran.[43]

The three different Shi'ite groupings in the Eastern Province—traditionalists, reformists, and radicals—took different approaches in the wake of the Arab Spring. The ultraconservative and traditionalist leaders opposed antigovernment activism and their leaders rushed to Riyadh to renew allegiance to the regime.[44] The Reform Movement members, on the other hand, wanted to take advantage of the changing geopolitical landscape across the Arab world to push for more reforms. However, they wanted to seek concessions through dialogue with the government rather than through confrontation, realizing that the Shi'ite minority would achieve little without support from Sunni groups, which were largely silent.[45] Many young activists, however, saw outright opposition as the only means to achieving reforms. A Shi'a religious scholar, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who in 2009 had called for the secession of the Eastern Province, played a leading role in mobilizing the masses.[46]

Since the government's arrest of al-Nimr on July 8, 2012, there have been continued protests in Qatif demanding his release.[47] Once a second-tier leader, al-Nimr's popularity has soared since his

arrest.[48] On March 25, 2013, prosecutors at the first court hearing called for al-Nimr's "death by crucifixion," which drew condemnation from Shi'ite leaders inside and outside Saudi Arabia as well as massive antigovernment demonstrations in the Eastern Province.[49] The Saudi Hezbollah has vowed to target Saudi oil installations if the cleric is executed.[50]

Iranian Influence in the Eastern Province

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has tried to exploit legitimate grievances of the Saudi Shi'ites for political ends, albeit with mixed results. While Iranian leaders such as IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani incorrectly claim that worldwide, Shi'ites "have transformed into a single base and have found a single leader" in Iran's supreme leader, only a tiny number of Saudi Shi'ites emulate Khamenei in religious and political affairs.[51]

Saudi Shi'ite leaders acknowledge that there are longstanding ties between the Saudi Shi'ites and *marja'iyyas* in Iran and Iraq. They send *khums* (religious taxes) to *marja'iyyas* in Iran and Iraq and frequently visit shrines in Iraq's Najaf and Karbala and in Iran's Qom. But Saudi Shi'ites assert that religious allegiance to foreign *marja'iyyas* does not amount to loyalty to foreign governments.[52] Government religious restrictions mean that Shi'ites are barred from higher religious education at home and their loyalties are questioned when they seek education abroad.

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Iranian government has stepped up soft-power efforts to influence events in the Eastern Province. Iranian Arabic television and radio channels urge the Shi'ites to rise against the Saudi and Bahraini regimes. Launched in 2003, Iran's Arabic television network Al Alam has become popular among Shi'ites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia for providing wide coverage of unrest in the two countries. Many Shi'ites say they watch Al Alam because popular Arab channels such as Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera largely ignore the Shi'ite protests. "Because there's no coverage from the international or free media, everybody is focusing on Al Alam and the (Lebanese Hezbollah's channel) Al Manar," said a

Shi'ite activist in the Eastern Province.[53]

Iran's interference in the region is not, however, limited to soft power. The IRGC appears to maintain Saudi Hezbollah's sleeper cells in the Kingdom and to use them for acts of terrorism inside and outside Saudi Arabia. On August 15, 2012, hackers attacked Saudi Aramco and erased data on three-quarters of its corporate computers, replacing all data with an image of a burning American flag. American intelligence officials alleged that Iran was the real perpetrator in that Iran used its agents within Aramco to stage the attack.[54] The cyber attack showed that with Iranian aid, only a small number of Shi'ites could do a great deal of damage to the Saudi oil industry.

There are also growing fears in the Persian Gulf monarchies that Iran might reactivate the Saudi Hezbollah to carry out acts of sabotage and terror to shape the outcome of the Arab Spring in the region, especially in Bahrain and Syria. In August 2011, an article in Middle East Online claimed that Riyadh was concerned about the increasing presence of Saudi Hezbollah members in Syria and Lebanon and believed that Tehran was reactivating the organization to counter Saudi support for the Syrian rebels.[55] In August 2012, United Arab Emirate daily *Akhbar al-Arab* reported that more than 50 Saudi Hezbollah militants received financial aid and military training in IRGC camps near Qom and Tehran and were then deployed to Karbala in December with forged Iraqi passports.[56]

Conclusion

The Arab Spring has reinvigorated the Shi'ites' call for reform in Saudi Arabia. Continued government discrimination and oppression radicalize Shi'ite youth and undermine the position of moderate leaders who prefer engagement to confrontation with the Saudi state.

The Saudi government must devise a comprehensive policy to end discrimination against the Shi'ites and integrate them into the Kingdom's sociopolitical system. This could help ensure security and stability in the oil-rich Eastern Province and undercut foreign influence in the region. As Arabs, Saudi Shi'ites would have no

desire to have a pro-Iranian orientation if they were treated fairly in their own homeland.

The current unrest in the Eastern Province is also important because it is happening at a time when calls for reforms are gaining momentum in Sunni regions as well. Although the royal family yet again showed its sticking power by weathering the Arab Spring storm, a revolution in the Kingdom remains a possibility in the future. In the past two years, the government has bought citizens' loyalty to remain in power, but it has not taken serious steps to address the root causes of widespread discontent across the country.

Indeed, the same economic, political, and demographic challenges that prompted revolutions in other Arab countries are prevalent in Saudi Arabia: a very young population struggling with rising unemployment, official corruption, a bloated public sector, extreme gender discrimination, lack of freedom of expression, and a growing demand for reforms in social media.[57] A cross-sectarian opposition could rock the Saudi state to its core. Instability in Saudi Arabia would jeopardize American interests in the region, benefit Iran and al-Qaeda, disrupt the equilibrium of global oil markets, and adversely affect economic recovery in the West. To ensure durable stability in the Kingdom, the United States must work with the Saudi government to achieve gradual but meaningful reforms.

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Has Kuwait Reached the Sectarian Tipping Point?

MICHAEL RUBIN

Kuwait has a population of perhaps 2.7 million, half of whom are citizens. Of these, between a quarter and a third are Shi'ites.[1] Kuwait's Shi'ites are diverse in terms of ethnicity—Arab, Persian, and Indian—and time spent in country. Kuwaitis differentiate between the "old settlers," who have been in Kuwait for centuries, and "new settlers," who may have called Kuwait home for only three or four generations.

In addition, every Shi'ite theoretically follows a single source of emulation, a living ayatollah to whom he pays *khums*, or religious taxes. But Kuwaiti Shi'ites follow several different sources of emulation and also differ in political orientation, generally falling into five groups:

- The *Ajam*, ethnic Persian Shi'ites who migrated to Kuwait from Iran in the second half of the 18th century and constitute Kuwait's largest Shi'ite community.

- The *Hassawi*, Shi'ites who arrived in Kuwait from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province following the Saudi conquest of eastern Arabia in the second half of the 18th century.

- The *Bahrani* or *Qalalif*, who hail from Bahrain and migrated to Kuwait in several waves beginning in the mid-17th century. They tend not to be too political.

- Some Iraqi Shi'ites who migrated from Basra or the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala and remain in Kuwait. Many who lacked formal Kuwaiti citizenship have returned to Iraq since Saddam's fall.

- Lebanese and South Asian Shi'ite workers, including some Ismaili Shi'ites, who have recently settled in Kuwait.[2] In addition, 45,000 Iranians live and work in Kuwait.[3]

The vast majority, however, consider themselves Kuwaitis first and foremost. The Kuwaiti state, for its part, has fully integrated Shi'ites into the economic, social, and political fabric of society. Indeed, Shi'ite families are among the wealthiest Kuwaitis: the Marafi Behbahani family from the Iranian province of Khuzistan,[4] the Matruk family from Bahrain, and businessman Mahdi Mahmoud Haji Haidar each reflect the opportunities Kuwaiti society provides to its citizens regardless of sect. According even to Shi'ite sectarian sources, Kuwaiti Shi'ites are better off than other Arab brethren.[5]

Affluence amplifies cultural and religious presence. Rich Kuwaiti Shi'ites sponsor mosques and seminaries.[6] As of 2007, there were over 30 official Shi'ite mosques in the country and just as many unofficial ones. In addition, there are 60 *Husayniyat*—Shi'ite commemoration halls—and hundreds of other facilities.[7]

Although some Shi'ite clerics are on the government payroll, the government generally does not interfere and allows the Shi'ite community to appoint its own prayer leaders.[8] Independent religious endowments handle finances.[9] Shi'ites face little discrimination in university admissions, with the exception of Kuwait University's Theological Faculty, which trains only Sunnis.[10] However, three major Shi'ite seminaries are in Kuwait, and Kuwaiti students frequent seminaries in both Iran and Iraq.[11]

Shi'ite Political Activity in Kuwait

Sectarianism in the Middle East has grown steadily since Iran's Islamic Revolution. Kuwaiti Shi'ites, however, solidified their identity

as Kuwaitis almost 60 years before the revolution. During the 1920 border war between Kuwait and the Sultanate of Nejd, Shi'ites fought successfully to protect Kuwait from Bedouin encroachment.[12]

Kuwaiti Shi'ites have long been active, but it was the country's emergence as a major oil exporter that transformed Kuwait from religious backwater to a significant center of Shi'ite activity. As oil wealth improved living standards, Shi'ite sources of emulation recognized the potential *khums* windfall they could collect from Kuwait.[13] Major ayatollahs dispatched representatives to collect the *khums* from within the newly rich emirate, which they could then utilize to bolster their religious and—for some—political influence inside Kuwait.

Kuwaiti Shi'ites have also gained influence in Kuwait's parliament, where they are well, though not proportionately, represented. In the 1963 elections, the 50-member National Assembly included 5 Shi'ites. Representation increased to 8 after the 1967 elections, 10 after 1971, and 13 in 1975. That same year, the emir appointed Abdul Mutalib al-Kadhimi, a Shi'ite, to be oil minister, one of the most important posts in the cabinet.[14]

Kuwait's relatively liberal political atmosphere attracted Shi'ite activists, including Muhammad al-Hussaini al-Shirazi. Shirazi long waged a two-front struggle against both the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad and the Najaf clergy who feared he would divert lucrative pilgrimage traffic from Najaf to his home town, Karbala. Shirazi added an ideological dimension to the competition when he welcomed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Iraq in 1965, a move that the Najaf clergy feared would antagonize the Iranian shah, whose opposition to Ba'athism they encouraged.[15] Shirazi's nephews Hadi and Mohammed-Taqi al-Modarresi soon joined Shirazi, transforming Kuwait temporarily into an independent base of Shi'ite scholarship.[16]

Events in Iraq and Iran would soon shake Kuwait's relative sectarian tranquility. As Ba'athist repression in Iraq grew, many Shi'ite activists—particularly members of the Islamic Da'wa Party—moved to Kuwait.[17] With one exception, all major Da'wa figures in Kuwait at the time were Iraqis.[18]

The Da'wa and Shirazi rivalry in Kuwait dominated local Shi'ite politics. Both groups established themselves in rival mosques, and

their competition soon spread to Kuwait University, where they established rival student organizations.[19]

The Najaf establishment was not aloof to Shirazi's activities: Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, at the time perhaps the most prominent Shi'ite scholar, sought to dismiss Shirazi's status as a scholar. Shirazi responded by obtaining a *fatwa* from Hassan al-Ihqaqi, perhaps the top cleric resident in Kuwait, attesting to his scholarship.[20]

The 1976 dissolution of parliament bolstered both Da'wa and Shirazi's followers, who argued that their more radical approach rather than old-guard Shi'ite movements could better represent Kuwaiti Shi'ites. Before Kuwait held new elections, the new Shi'ite movements also primed the Kuwaiti Shi'ite community to be more receptive to Khomeini's propaganda.[21]

The Iranian Revolution Rocks Kuwait

Iran's successful Islamic Revolution reverberated throughout the region and sent shockwaves across Kuwait. Kuwaitis were well acquainted with Khomeini. In 1969, Khomeini dispatched Ali al-Mohri, son-in-law of Ayatollah Abbas al-Mohri, to be his first representative to Kuwait.[22] Initially, Khomeini limited his activities in Kuwait to collecting *khums*, even though some of his radical students subsequently came to Kuwait to preach and agitate.[23] Shirazi's followers also distributed Khomeini's speeches in pamphlets and on audio cassettes to Kuwaiti Shi'ites.[24]

A year before Khomeini ousted the shah, Mohammad Montazeri, son of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's postrevolution deputy, came to Kuwait to organize Shi'ite recruits to train with the Palestine Liberation Organization and Lebanese Amal. Many of these recruits subsequently joined the Office of Liberation Movements, the predecessor to today's Quds Force, the elite unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps charged with export of revolution (an Iranian euphemism for terrorism).[25] Montazeri also asked Kuwaiti authorities to allow Khomeini, whose residence in Iraq was becoming untenable, to come to Kuwait.[26] The Kuwaitis initially

granted Khomeini a visa but later canceled it, forcing the cleric to flee instead to France.[27] Khomeini harbored a grudge against Kuwait for the rest of his life.

With the victory of the Islamic revolution, Iran replaced Iraq as the main external influence on Kuwaiti Shi'ite politics. Three weeks after Khomeini's victory, Ayatollah Abbas al-Mohri led a large delegation from Kuwait to Khomeini's headquarters in Tehran.[28] Khomeini subsequently appointed al-Mohri to be his Friday prayer leader in Kuwait.[29]

Encouraged by his success and foreign delegations, Khomeini began attacking Kuwait. He called for transnational unity of Muslims in "a great Islamic government," essentially dismissing Kuwait's sovereignty.[30] On June 9, 1979, Khomeini warned the Kuwaiti government against "aiding the opponents of Islam and deviant individuals."[31] Three months later, Khomeini discussed the potential to "export the revolution to Kuwait."[32] Khomeini's Kuwaiti followers formed the "Hezbollah of Kuwait."

As Khomeini's influence increased, Sheikh Jabar, Kuwait's emir, purged Shi'ites from sensitive positions in the oil sector, police, and security services.[33] Kuwaiti Shi'ites resented the Kuwaiti government's measures, but they had essentially become political footballs.[34]

In the face of Iranian aggression, Kuwaitis were just as provocative. The two governments clashed after Kuwaiti media began to refer to the Iranian province of Khuzi-stan as "Arabistan," or "Land of the Arabs," implicitly endorsing Iraq's desire to annex the province.[35] Mutual charges of interference in each other's internal affairs followed. As tensions increased, Kuwaiti authorities first limited al-Mohri's movement, then prevented him from preaching, and finally deported him and his family and stripped them of Kuwaiti citizenship.[36]

The Iran-Iraq War further strained relations. Few Kuwaiti Shi'ites fought for Iran, but Kuwait helped Iraq financially.[37] Tehran also accused Kuwait of allowing Iraq to use its ports to import supplies and export oil. Iran apparently responded by sabotaging Kuwaiti oil installations.

A 1983 series of bombings had Iranian fingerprints.[38] Targets included the US and French embassies, a US military contractor's

compound, the international airport, an industrial center, and the Ministry of Electricity and Water. Three Kuwaitis were among the perpetrators. The other perpetrators included 17 Iraqis, three Lebanese, and two bedouns—stateless individuals living in Kuwait.[39] Some of the suspects were teachers at Iranian schools in Kuwait City.[40] Tensions increased as Iranian forces began to target Kuwaiti oil tankers in 1984, and the following year after Iranian-backed terrorists attempted to assassinate the Kuwaiti emir.

Within Kuwait, the Islamic Revolution precipitated years of Da'wa fissures, often leading to an alphabet soup of new, short-lived spinoffs. Al-Mohri attracted younger, more radical Kuwaiti activists, but as the Kuwaiti government cracked down, some of his followers joined other organizations, including the Social Cultural Association or the National Islamic Accord Movement.[41]

Another split occurred toward the end of the 1980s after Kurani disputed Khomeini's governance theories. Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi Asefi, who regarded Khomeini as the highest source of emulation and would later rise to head the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly—an Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite umbrella group that promotes Iranian revolutionary principles worldwide—highlighted ethnic divisions when he suggested Kurani's opposition to Khomeini was rooted in racism against non-Arabs.[42]

If, during the 1970s and 1980s, sectarianism threatened to drive Shi'ites and Sunnis apart in Kuwait, the 1990s was a decade of healing rifts. Because so many Kuwaiti Sunnis were abroad when Iraq invaded, Kuwaiti Shi'ites disproportionately suffered occupation. Their resistance to the Iraqis earned them renewed respect among Sunnis.[43] Meanwhile, Khomeini's dismissal of Montazeri led Shirazi's followers to sever relations with Tehran. After Khomeini's death, Tehran also sought to ease tensions.[44]

Kuwaiti authorities took full advantage of the Shirazi schism and sought to co-opt former radicals to offset Iranian influence. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Information permitted Shirazi's followers to publish newspapers and magazines and establish their own television network.[45] Kuwait also allowed the Islamic National Alliance to work to organize Shi'ite candidates prior to the 1992 parliamentary

elections.[46] Five Shi'ites joined the postliberation parliament.

During Kuwait's 2003 parliamentary elections, Shirazi's followers aligned themselves with a handful of people who had remained faithful to the initial Da'wa line and defeated candidates of the pro-Iranian Islamic National Coalition.[47] After their defeat, the coalition fractured and gave rise to the Islamic National Understanding, politically oriented toward the reform movement in Iran.[48] That same year, to unify their existence following Shirazi's passing, his followers established the Assembly for Justice and Peace.[49] In 2004, Shirazi's followers formed the Front for Justice and Peace to counter Kuwaiti Hezbollah, and in 2005, original Da'wa members formed a group called simply the Pact, which also opposed Kuwaiti Hezbollah.[50] Shortly before the 2006 elections, Shirazi's followers formed the Coalition of the National Assemblies, a group that excluded the Islamic National Alliance because, according to Abdul Hussain as-Sultan, secretary-general of the Front for Justice and Peace, "They are too close to Iran and want to dominate the Shi'ite scene."[51]

In 2006, the Shaykhis, a Shi'ite offshoot sect, formed the Assembly of the Human Message. While the Shaykhis traditionally eschew politics, the need for self-defense in the context of Iraqi sectarian violence led them to form organizations to protect communal interests, a structure they adopted not only in Basra but also in Kuwait.

Kuwait's Political Maelstrom

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq changed regional dynamics. Many Western analysts suggest that Saddam's ouster empowered Iran and, more broadly, Shi'ites.[52] Warnings about the so-called Shi'ite crescent reflect traditional Arab Sunni bias that Shi'ites represent a fifth column. Still, as Kuwait has moved to liberalize, extremists have used sectarian tensions to undercut political stability.

At its core, the problem is changing demography. Kuwait's population is aging. Outside the cosmopolitan Kuwait City, half of Kuwait's population now comes from the more conservative countryside, and many of the so-called Bedouin have roots in Saudi Arabia's tribal and religiously conservative interior.[53] Because of their higher birth rate

and males' tendency to marry multiple times, the Bedouin population is growing.

To preserve the Kuwaiti elite's more tolerant culture, Kuwaiti authorities have moved to reduce Bedouin influence by cracking down on Saudis acquiring Kuwaiti citizenship, sometimes stripping Kuwaiti citizenship from those also holding Saudi passports.[54] The issue is also intricately linked with the issue of the Bidoon, stateless people whose ancestors Kuwaiti authorities suspect destroyed their original, non-Kuwaiti passports to claim statelessness fraudulently.[55]

As the Bedouin population has increased, they have sought to flex their muscle. The result has been deadlock, if not political chaos. Between 2006 and 2012, the Kuwaiti emir dissolved parliament three times and suspended it a fourth. Not every issue was sectarian—civil service pay and inflation have also been key issues. The parliamentary dissolutions and suspension may have averted crises in the short term, but long-term difficulties remain unresolved. Against the backdrop of deadlock, sectarianism has become a potent tool.

On February 7, 2006, Kuwaiti Emir Sabah IV appointed his nephew Nasir al-Muhammad al-Sabah to be prime minister. Nasir had broad experience: he had worked at both the foreign ministry and United Nations before serving as Kuwait's ambassador to Iran and Afghanistan and then as minister of information, minister of labor and social affairs, minister of state for foreign affairs, and chief of the emir's office.

As political reform continued—in May 2005, women won both the right to vote and serve in the National Assembly—parliamentarians became more vocal. A key opposition demand was to reduce the number of electoral districts from 25 to 5 to, theoretically, reduce tribal influence.[56] When Nasir refused, the parliament demanded he submit to questioning. To avoid that questioning, the emir suspended parliament.

In June 2006, Kuwait held new elections. Four Shi'ites won seats, no women won seats, and the emir subsequently agreed to consolidate districts. That parliament would not serve out its term. In March 2008, against the backdrop of the government's refusal to

accede to parliamentary demands to raise civil servant pay, the cabinet resigned and the emir dissolved the National Assembly.

Again, on May 17, 2008, Kuwaitis went to the polls. Rather than curtailing tribal and Bedouin influence, the reconfigured districts amplified it. Sunni Islamists, tribal leaders, and their allies won 27 seats; Shi'ites won 5. The conservative forces soon seized on sectarian issues as a means to weaken the government. On November 16, 2008, three Salafist members of parliament announced their intention to question Nasir after he allowed Muhammad Baqir al-Fali, an Iran-based Shi'ite preacher whom a Kuwaiti court had charged with insulting the first two caliphs, to enter Kuwait. Fali was deported, but when that did not satiate the Salafi parliamentarians, the cabinet resigned.[57] Their resignation enabled the government again to bypass a political show that could only exacerbate conflict.

The emir may have believed he had sidestepped the issue. He reappointed Nasir, who could begin with a blank slate. But the maneuver did not satiate the opposition, who had learned just how powerful sectarian arguments could be. Ahmad Lari, a Shi'ite deputy elected in 2006, condemned the conservative factions' embrace of sectarian issues for political ends. "It is necessary that we be alert—whether we are Shiites, Sunnis, Bedouin, or town dwellers—in order to protect Kuwait from this sedition," he declared.[58]

This outcome was not to be. With Fali gone, Sunni extremists seized upon Husayn al-Fuhayd as their next target. Fuhayd was a Shi'ite preacher whom they accused of being "the most extremist Shiite cleric, and most abusive against the Prophet's companions, whose presence in the country will lead to a huge sedition."[59]

After the 2009 elections—which saw nine Shi'ites win seats—the emir again asked Nasir to form a government. It was not an easy tenure, as Salafis fanned sectarian flames to incite communal discord and weaken the government. A preacher at one prominent mosque, for example, disparaged Shi'ites as heathens. Another imam used his pulpit to condemn Shi'ites during Friday prayers.[60] On some occasions, Shi'ite parliamentarians demanded that the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs crack down on Sunni incitement.[61]

Both Sunnis and Shi'ites have had grievances. Shi'ite leaders

alleged that the secondary school curriculum depicted Shi'ites as infidels and polytheists and that a royal Qu'ran recitation competition discriminated against Shi'ites.[62] Shi'ite parliamentarians have also complained that Shi'ite clerics receive more intrusive interrogation than their Sunni counterparts at Kuwait International Airport.[63]

Officials did not deny the pernicious influence of Sunni extremists. Shortly after his retirement, former interior minister Jabir al-Khalid, accused the Muslim Brotherhood of trying to brainwash youth.[64] The government has cracked down on hate speech across the sectarian divide,[65] and prominent Sunnis have also rallied to the defense of Shi'ites after repeated vandalism against a Shi'ite mosque.[66]

Most recently, sectarianism has been seen with regard to blasphemy laws that, as written, might make insulting those revered by Sunnis to be a capital offense while leaving amorphous the criminality of insulting those revered by Shi'ites.[67]

Rather than simply extinguishing sectarian fires, the Kuwaiti government has become increasingly proactive. It has provided medical care on the Shi'ite commemoration of Ashura. Kuwait University likewise postponed exams scheduled on the holiday.[68] And when tensions peaked amidst the 2010 Twitter blasphemy scandal, Kuwaiti authorities briefly banned public gatherings until tempers had cooled.[69] The government has used laws against undermining national unity to prosecute sectarian instigators.[70]

Shi'ite leaders also worked to calm tensions. Shi'ite cleric Mohammad Baqir al-Mohri, for example, offered the Salafis an olive branch. "In the interest of Islam first and then in the interest of the national unity of Kuwait," he declared, "I am fully prepared to sit down with the brother Salafis to look for points of agreement on disputed issues between us," an invitation he offered repeatedly.[71] After several hundred people protesting corruption stormed the National Assembly in November 2011, al-Mohri came to the government's defense.[72]

But external events exacerbated tension. On February 14, 2011, sectarian tension erupted in Bahrain, leading to its worst violence in over 15 years. The Gulf Cooperation Council dispatched a joint military force to Bahrain to help quell the Shi'ite protesters. Suddenly, the Kuwaiti government found itself in sectarian crosshairs.

First, Salafist members of parliament demanded Kuwait send troops to Bahrain to fight the Shi'ites. Then, after Kuwait sent naval forces to assist in Bahrain, Shi'ite deputy Saleh Ashur insisted the government explain itself. The next day, on April 1, 2011, the cabinet resigned to extricate itself from the impasse.[73]

The procedural maneuver to dismiss governments rather than answer parliament had outlived its utility, however. Nasir formed a new government on May 8 but served only a half year before the emir replaced him with Defense Minister Jaber al-Sabah against the backdrop of a corruption scandal.

Al-Sabah called new elections for February 2, 2012. Seven Shi'ites won seats, but anti-government Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood, and tribal forces gained further ground. Political paralysis continued as the opposition forces continued to battle the central government. Again, external events exacerbated political disputes. A February 29, 2012, decision to recognize the Syrian National Council as the legitimate Syrian government fell largely along sectarian lines.[74] In a subsequent debate, a shouting match erupted after a Sunni parliamentarian accused a Shi'ite counterpart of being the "servant of the Syrian president."[75] On June 18, 2012, the emir suspended parliament.

Two days later, the Constitutional Court voided the February elections and reinstated the 2009 parliament. The emir scheduled new elections for December 2012. After the court voided his efforts to reverse electoral district consolidation, the emir decreed that voters could select only one candidate rather than follow a complicated system in which they could cast four votes. Tension grew as elections approached and turned uncharacteristically violent. The elections proceeded despite a boycott by many who had won seats in the voided February polls. Shi'ites won 17 seats, their highest representation ever. However, Shi'ites lost half their seats in the subsequent July 2013 elections.

Stepping Back from the Brink

Although sectarian tension increased during the heady years of Iran's Islamic Revolution and during the last several years of political

paralysis, the vast majority of Kuwaiti Shi'ites have consistently proven their loyalty to Kuwait and rebuffed Iranian attempts to leverage them in pursuit of Iranian policy goals.

Unable to leverage Kuwaiti Shi'ites to its cause, the Iranian regime has become increasingly aggressive. In April 2010, a Kuwaiti paper alleged that Kuwaiti security was on high alert against an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) plot against flights at Kuwait International Airport.[76] The following month, Kuwaiti authorities disrupted an IRGC cell.

The plot came against the backdrop of a Kuwaiti initiative to better relations with Iran.[77] The cell was reportedly monitoring American movements and activity in Kuwait's oil fields. Most worrisome were indications that the cell had recruited both Kuwaiti military officers and Shi'ites from old families.[78] Sunni extremists seized upon the plot's unraveling to incite further against Kuwaiti Shi'ites.[79] Kuwait subsequently expelled three Iranian diplomats.

No sooner had Kuwaiti security officials foiled that plot than another surfaced involving an alleged Iranian plot to provoke sectarian tension by assassinating Shi'ite religious figures in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf.[80] Although the IRGC coordinated the first plot, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence ran the second cell. Curiously, the two cells were not in communication with each other and appeared not to be aware of each other's activities.[81]

The Islamic Republic dismissed Kuwait's claims as illogical. "Iran does not actually have a need for a spy network in a small country like Kuwait," former IRGC commander Hussein Alai quipped, adding, "The entire Kuwaiti army is smaller than one Iranian division."[82]

It was against this backdrop that 90 percent of Kuwaitis—including many Shi'ites—called for the deportation of any expatriate Shi'ites linked to Hezbollah or the IRGC.[83] Perhaps because of these Iranian plots and popular sentiment, Kuwait was quicker than the European Union to designate Hezbollah a terror group.[84] Tensions increased after an Iranian parliamentarian allegedly threatened military action against Kuwait.[85]

The rise of Da'wa and other Shi'ite groups in post-Saddam Iraq has also contributed to sectarian tension in Kuwait. In 2005, a suspect in

the 1983 Kuwait bombing campaign won election to parliament.[86] Kuwaiti security officials have also carefully monitored sectarian indoctrination and illegal weapons training conducted, respectively, by Saudi and Iraqi extremists in Kuwait's western desert.[87]

Although Prime Minister Jabir denied a media report regarding the presence of thousands of Iraqi radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's militiamen among the Bidoon in Kuwait,[88] Kuwaiti authorities did refuse entry to Murtada al-Quzwayni, a radical Iraqi Shi'ite cleric.[89] Even when banned, some more radical Iraqi Shi'ites have turned to YouTube and radio to broadcast sectarian incitement into their smaller neighbor.[90]

Will Kuwait witness sectarian violence similar to that which afflicts Iraq, Bahrain, or eastern Saudi Arabia? Kuwait is a religiously diverse country in a region where diversity often breeds instability. Political paralysis and frequent elections have also increased tension. Sectarianism can be a useful tool for populist politicians, however corrosive it can be to society. Kuwait's relatively free press and social media ironically can exacerbate tension, especially for those seeking to publish religious incitement.

Although the Iranian recruitment of Kuwaiti military officers and those from old families should raise alarms, recruitment can be a complicated business that reflects not simply ideological affinity or financial greed, but also other circumstances such as blackmail or extortion. Through periods of strain, Kuwait's cohesive national identity has always triumphed. Unlike Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, where Sunni leaders actively discriminate against their Shi'ite citizens, the Kuwaiti monarchy's willingness not only to embrace but also to defend their Shi'ite subjects strengthens the Kuwaiti state and immunizes it from the internal turmoil that afflicts other states in the region.

Iran, Hezbollah, and perhaps some Iraqi Shi'ite elements have sought to extend their battle to Kuwait, but Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Sunni radicals can also play just as corrosive a role. Kuwaiti authorities have worked to counter Shi'ite radicalism, but balancing democratization with changing demography may pose an insurmountable challenge.

Kuwait's liberal elite—those interested in the good of all Kuwaitis regardless of sectarian preference—are increasingly becoming a minority against the backdrop of higher tribal and Bedouin birth rates. Kuwait could preserve sectarian peace or continue its relatively democratic political culture, but it may soon be forced to choose between the two.

This choice creates a conundrum for US policymakers whose natural inclination is to encourage democracy and liberalization but who do not want to endanger a regime that has proven itself a reliable partner for Washington. The best approach for the United States is to embrace a more nuanced understanding of regional sectarianism and to recognize that sometimes the most corrosive sectarianism comes not from Shi'ites, who often reject Iranian influence, but from younger Sunnis who look to Saudi society as a model.

Indeed, embracing and engaging Kuwait's moderate Shi'ites might be the best anecdote to Iranian influence because, against the backdrop of tribal animosity, a strong US partnership that spans both Sunnis and Shi'ites in Kuwait would undercut Iranian efforts to depict Tehran as the protector Kuwaiti Shi'ites need. At the same time, as Kuwait's leadership faces a demographic challenge from Sunni Bedouin, forging a pan-sectarian coalition is the key to preserving Kuwait's traditional tolerance and relative liberalism.

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Is Sectarian Balance in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar at Risk?

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The Persian Gulf states of Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have largely been immune to the rising tide of sectarianism that has rocked the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. The three monarchies have successfully integrated their Shi'ite minority populations into their countries' sociopolitical and economic spheres, giving those populations little reason to engage in violence or seek political guidance from Iran or Iraq. Omani, Qatari, and Emirati Shi'ites strongly identify themselves as citizens of their respective countries and remain loyal to their ruling regimes. However, the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war—a sectarian conflict between the Shi'ite Iran-Hezbollah-Assad axis and the opposition groups backed by regional Sunni governments—are threatening Sunni-Shi'ite stability in the UAE, Qatar, and to a lesser degree, Oman. The United States should help maintain harmony in these states by reaching out to independent Shi'ite business communities and by working with regional leaders to ensure equal citizenship, political rights, and religious freedom among minority populations.

The Shi'ite Communities of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman has a population of approximately three million, two-thirds of which are citizens. About three-quarters of Omani nationals, including Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, are Ibadi Muslims; this Islamic sect evolved from a seventh-century AD rebellion and is distinct from Twelver Shi'ism and traditional Sunnism.

Although Shi'ites in Oman constitute only 5 percent of citizens, they possess disproportionate influence in the political and economic spheres. They strongly identify themselves as Omanis and are loyal to the regime despite their different religious views.[1] Omani Shi'ites are ethnically and linguistically diverse and are divided into three main groups: the Lawatiyya, the Baharna, and the Ajam.

The Lawatiyya are the wealthiest, the largest in number, and the most politically influential Shi'ite group in Oman. Most Lawatiyya reside in Muscat Province—predominantly in Muttrah and Muscat cities—and are also present in small numbers around the coastal cities of Al-Batinah Province.[2] The group's origin is unclear; many historians believe they migrated to Oman from Hyderabad, a city in present-day Pakistan, more than three centuries ago.[3] In recent decades, however, the community has claimed Arab descent, reasoning that they temporarily lost their Arab and tribal identity by residing in India for centuries after the Islamic conquest of the subcontinent. The Lawatiyya were initially Ismaili Shi'ites, but were excommunicated after a dispute over the legitimacy of Aga Khan's succession in 1862.[4] Some Iranian authors claim that Iranian preachers visiting Oman have converted the community into the Twelver school.[5]

The community has traditionally occupied the Sur al-Lawatiyya, a gated complex of residential and religious buildings located in Muttrah. Most Lawatiyya families have long since resettled in Muscat's more modern neighborhoods. In the past, non-Shi'ites were forbidden from entering the Sur, but visitors can now enter the site by invitation. Money from the Lawatiyya charitable trust [*waqf*] goes into funding and maintaining the Sur.[6] Not all Shi'ites frequent the Sur, however; the Baharna and Ajam communities and noncitizen Shi'ite groups have their own mosques and places of worship and social gathering [*husseiniyas*] in Muscat.[7]

Lawatiyya families run big businesses, dominate trade, and hold sizable shares in the National Bank of Oman and petroleum companies such as Petroleum Development Oman.[8] The al-Sultan family, for example, is one of Oman's oldest and richest merchant families. The family owns W. J. Towell Group of companies, a leading Omani private-sector contracting firm, which also has branches in Kuwait.[9]

Additionally, the Lawatiyya are the most educated community in Oman, and their knowledge of South Asian languages, Arabic, and English has contributed to their success.[10] As a result, the Lawatiyya have held senior positions in the government, including posts as cabinet ministers, members in the Diwan of the Royal Court, and ambassadors to the United States and European countries.[11]

The Baharna Shi'ites are Arabs who migrated to Oman from Bahrain, Iraq, and eastern Saudi Arabia over the last few centuries. The Baharna mostly live in Muscat and are adherents of Twelver Shi'ism. They maintain close contacts with fellow Baharna communities in other Gulf nations; following the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, for example, the Omani Baharna accommodated relatives fleeing Iraq and Kuwait.

While the Omani Baharna number only about a few thousand people, they play an influential role in Oman's politics and economy. Many families are represented in the Diwan of the Royal Court, and two prominent Baharni families, the al-Asfur and the Darwish, are among Oman's top businesspeople. Additionally, several Baharnis have held prominent political positions in Oman: Asim al-Jamali became the first minister of health in 1970 and later served as Oman's prime minister, and Ahmed Bin Abdul Nabi Makki served as the Omani ambassador to the United States and France and as the minister of civil service and minister of finance.[12]

The Ajam are Persian Shi'ites who migrated to Oman from southern Iran over the last several centuries, mainly in search of better economic opportunities and to escape the policy of compulsory military service under the Pahlavi rulers. They predominantly live in Oman's northern al-Batinah Province abutting the United Arab Emirates and in small numbers in Muscat. The Ajam community has assimilated well into Omani society; they rarely speak Persian and do not maintain family ties with Iran, and many have intermarried with other communities and have even taken Arab family names. Compared to the Lawatiyya and Baharna, the Ajam are less socially visible and are underrepresented in Oman's political and economic spheres. Many members, however, serve in the low ranks of Oman's security forces. Sheikh Mohammed Ridha al-Ajmi serves as the community's senior

religious authority and as a liaison to the government, and they have their own mosques and charities.[13]

Each of Oman's three Shi'ite groups has its own elected leadership committee that manages the community's affairs according to the Shi'ite Jafari'a jurisprudence, including the community's endowments and charity distributions. Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) has lax oversight of the committee's financial affairs. In addition to these three groups, there are noncitizen Shi'ite communities from Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan, and other regional countries who have come to Oman for work.[14]

Iranian Influence over Omani Shi'ites. Iran's influence over Omani Shi'ites has been limited. A large majority of Omani Shi'ites follow Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as their religious source of emulation, and few look to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other Iranian ayatollahs for religious or juridical guidance. This reality, however, might change after al-Sistani's death, especially as a growing number of Omani Shi'ites have chosen Qom, Iran, over Najaf, Iraq, for religious and theological studies because of the past decade's security concerns in Iraq.[15]

Despite the Omani Shi'ites' demonstrated loyalty to Oman, some government officials and non-Shi'ite citizens still question the Shi'ites' loyalty, mainly because Shi'ite leadership has maintained ties with foreign sources of emulation [*marja'iyyas*] in Iran and Iraq. In 2008, a senior MERA official told an American diplomat that Sheikh Mohammed Ridha al-Ajmi, the leader of the al-Ajam community, was "Iranian-influenced." The official also alleged that Sheikh Ihsan Sadiq al-Lawati, the leader of the Lawatiyya community who studied theology in Qom from 1984 to 1993, also had pro-Iranian leanings. In contrast, he described the Baharna's Sayyid Sharif al-Massouwi as "reasonable" and "following his own views" instead of taking dictation from foreign sources.[16]

Some Omanis also criticize their Shi'ite compatriots for sending religious charity to Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon rather than assisting the poor inside Oman itself. As a result, MERA and the

internal security services monitor Shi'ite activities to limit potentially destabilizing foreign influences on the Omani Shi'ite communities and to prevent strong connections between Omani Shi'ites and transnational Shi'ite political groups such as Hezbollah and the followers of the prominent Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammed al-Shirazi.[17] Oman's security services vet names and monitor the activities of foreign Shi'ite leaders who visit Oman during Shi'ite religious festivals to ensure that they do not promote political agendas; the Omani government has even been known to occasionally refuse visas to Iranian religious figures who seek to visit Oman.

Perhaps because of the Omani government's inclusion of its Shi'ite minority, as well as the community's small size, transnational Shi'ite groups have failed to make significant inroads into Oman. Most notably, there is no Hezbollah branch in Oman. Even the two leading international Shi'ite movements—the Dawa and Shirazi groups—had little success in their attempts to influence the Omani Shi'ites in the 1970s.[18]

Shi'ites in the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates' (UAE's) population is more diverse, and noncitizens account for about 89 percent of the country's nine million residents. Of the one million nationals, between 10 and 15 percent are Shi'ites; the rest are Sunnis.[19] The largest noncitizen Shi'ite communities in the UAE are merchants and migrant workers from India, Pakistan, and Iran. A majority of Shi'ites—both citizens and noncitizens—live in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Sharjah. Shi'ites have lived in the UAE since the mid-19th century, when they migrated to the Trucial Coast from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and India. Most Arab and Iranian Shi'ites in the UAE belong to the Twelver school, while Shi'ite immigrants from South Asia are predominantly Ismailis.[20]

Islam is the state religion in the UAE, and the constitution's Article 32 guarantees the "freedom to exercise religious worship . . . in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals."[21] Unlike Saudi

Arabia, the Emirati government allows its Shi'ite minority to congregate and worship in their own mosques and *husseiniyas*, with only a few restrictions. Although Shi'ite mosques and *husseiniyas* are considered private property, Shi'ite representatives can request financial assistance from the government for building and maintaining their places of worship.[22]

While the government appoints all Sunni imams and distributes weekly state-approved sermons to Sunni mosques, it has provided the Shi'ites with the autonomy to choose their mosque leaders and to write their own sermons (with some exceptions in Dubai). To promote Sunni-Shi'ite harmony, senior Sunni government officials attend Shi'ite celebrations. Although foreign Shi'ite communities from South Asia, Iran, and Arab countries run their own places of worship, they often intermingle for Friday prayers and important religious gatherings.[23] The Emirati Shi'ites have their own council—the Jaafari Waqf Charity Council—which administers Shi'ite family law cases such as marriage, divorce, death, and inheritance. The Islamic studies curriculum teaches Sunni Islam only, but it does not include discriminatory content against the Shi'ite faith.[24]

Emirati Shi'ites have greatly benefited from the UAE's economic boom, with some Shi'ite families included among the richest Emirati merchants. In recent years, Shi'ite-run businesses such as Alfardan, Al Sayegh, Galadari, and Al Yousuf LLC have prospered. Although Emirati Shi'ites are more satisfied than their co-religionists in other Arab countries, they do face some discrimination in public-sector employment, especially in the security and diplomatic sectors; the federal state security department, too, only hires Sunni Emiratis, and there are also no Shi'ite pilots in the UAE air force. However, while Emirati officials publicly speak about Islamic extremists and the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts to gain a foothold in the UAE, they do not mention Shi'ite citizens as a security threat.[25]

Iranian Influence over Emirati Shi'ites. After the Islamic Revolution, UAE leaders were worried that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's hegemonic ambitions would cause them trouble. When an Iranian religious leader arrived in Dubai on a private visit right after the

revolution, the authorities detained and deported him.[26] Despite this concern, Tehran has managed to increase its religious, cultural, and economic influence in the UAE through a concerted soft-power campaign. Taking advantage of a sizable Iranian expatriate population in Dubai, the new revolutionary regime in Tehran began building and financing many religious institutions and charities within the city. In 1984, for example, the Iranian government built the Imam Hussein Mosque next to the Iranian Hospital in Jumeirah, Dubai. The Office of the Supreme Leader appoints the mosque's imams, who also serve as Khamenei's representative to the Shi'ite community in the UAE. In early 2010, Khamenei appointed Hojatoleslam Seyyed Mahmoud Madani Bajestani to the post.[27] Each year, the mosque holds more than 150 religious ceremonies in which Shi'ites of different nationalities participate.[28]

The Ajam, who have lived for more than a century in what is now the UAE, are politically loyal to the Emirati state and identify themselves as Emiratis; yet some government authorities still question their loyalty because of their spiritual allegiance to the Iranian clergy. Many Shi'ites, for example, display photos of Iranian ayatollahs in their houses rather than those of Emirati leaders. Shi'ite allegiances, however, vary region to region: most wealthy and educated Shi'ites see themselves as Emirati first and Shi'ite second, while in poorer northern emirates, Shi'ite identity takes precedence over national identity.[29]

Thousands of Iranians also immigrated to the UAE in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the UAE is currently home to about half a million Iranian expatriates, most of whom live in Dubai.[30] As a result, an estimated 8,000 Iranian businesses operate in Dubai.[31] In recent years, however, as the United States and its allies have intensified sanctions against Iran and put more pressure on the Emirati government to enforce the sanctions, the UAE has become less hospitable for the Iranian business community.[32] Trade between Iran and the UAE dropped from $9.8 billion in 2011 to $6.8 billion in 2012. Membership in the Dubai-based Iranian Business Council has fallen from 400 to 200 companies over the past two years as traders have moved to safer markets in Asia and Iraq.[33]

Iranian businesspeople in the UAE now find it difficult to buy property, receive loans, and extend residence permits.

Moreover, given the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East, the Emirati federal authorities exercise more vigilance over Shi'ite citizens and Iranian and Lebanese diaspora in the country. The authorities fear that Iran may try to incite Emirati Shi'ites against the government and harm sectarian balance in the country.[34] In July 2013, the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee said the Emirati government had deported 500 Iranian nationals.[35] The committee's chairman, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, urged Iranian expatriates to leave the UAE and invest in Iran;[36] however, most Iranian merchants are reluctant to return home and are relocating business assets to other countries.

Many independent Iranian businesspeople in the UAE claim that while sanctions have hurt law-abiding Iranian merchants, organizations owned by or affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—Iran's military-industrial powerhouse—are still prospering by engaging in illicit trade through the UAE's loosely regulated ports or by paying bribes. These independent merchants—many of whom are critical of the Islamic Republic—do not call for lifting the sanctions, but suggest that the United States and European countries directly target individuals and entities related to the IRGC and the Iranian government.[37] According to Western diplomats and Gulf officials, the IRGC establishes fake front businesses in the UAE to circumvent sanctions and to acquire precision equipment from Western suppliers.[38] The US Department of the Treasury has sanctioned many IRGC-affiliated companies in the UAE over the past five years.[39]

The Shi'ite Community in Qatar

About 87 percent of Qatar's two million residents are noncitizens, divided almost equally between South Asian and Arab migrant workers. Of the 13 percent citizen population, a majority are Sunni Muslims, while Shi'ites constitute between 5 and 15 percent. Noncitizens run the gamut from Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims to Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists.[40]

The Shi'ites in Qatar can be divided into three groups: Baharna, Ajam, and migrant workers. Similar to in Oman and UAE, the Baharna are Arab Shi'ites who came to Qatar from Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia.[41] They maintain close ties with Saudi Shi'ite leaders, who periodically visit Qatar by invitation to speak at religious ceremonies. Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the most prominent Shi'ite leader in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, has been a frequent guest speaker at Shi'ite mosques and *husseiniyas* in Qatar.[42] Shi'ites from Qatar also travel to Saudi Arabia to attend religious festivities.[43]

The Ajam Shi'ites, who came to Qatar from Iran to seek economic opportunity, now speak Arabic and identify themselves as Qataris. In addition, there are tens of thousands of Shi'ite migrant workers from Iran, Pakistan, India, and regional Arab countries. A majority of foreign citizens in Qatar, including Shi'ites, work in the construction sector.[44] As Qatar is preparing for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, one million foreign workers may enter the country to improve its infrastructure and build stadiums.[45] As in other Gulf nations, the Shi'ite minority in Qatar resides close to the oil fields, thus making Shi'ites strategically important for the government.[46]

Qatar's Shi'ite minority is well integrated into society: it is loyal to the ruling regime, lives in harmony with the Sunni majority, and enjoys equal citizenship and political rights.[47] Shi'ites are present in most government departments, including in the country's Consultative Assembly.[48] The state religion in Qatar is Islam, and a majority of Qataris belong to the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, including the ruling Al Thani family.[49] Unlike in Saudi Arabia, Qatari Shi'ites can practice their religious rituals freely.[50] Although the public education curriculum is based on Sunni Islam, it does not contain anti-Shi'ite propaganda. In 2005, the government established a separate court system for the Shi'ites to deal with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other personal family matters on the basis of Shi'ite Jafari jurisprudence. The Shi'ite communities run several mosques and more than 20 *husseiniyas* across the country.[51]

Iranian Influence over Qatari Shi'ites. The Qatari government viewed Iran's Islamic Revolution with considerably less anxiety than

did Saudi Arabia: the Qatari Shi'ite population was too small to stage an Iranian-backed coup.[52] Moreover, the integration of Shi'ites into Qatari society, along with the close relationship between Shi'ite businessmen and Qatar's ruling family, made it difficult for Iran to leverage the Qatari Shi'ites for political ends.[53] A majority of Qatari Shi'ites emulate Iraq's Ayatollah al-Sistani as *marja'iyya*; followers of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei are smaller in number. However, although Qatari Shi'ites do not receive political guidance from Shi'ite leaders in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran, they maintain deep connections with theological centers in these countries. Because Qatari Shi'ites do not have their own religious seminaries, they travel mostly to Iran and Iraq for religious education.[54]

Unlike the Saudi government, Qatar's ruling family maintains a good relationship with foreign Shi'ite leaders. In December 2010, Qatar's former emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, met with Khamenei in Tehran and pledged joint efforts for unity between Shi'ites and Sunnis.[55] On the emir's invitation in 2011, an influential Iraqi Shi'ite leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, traveled to Doha to discuss Bahrain. Qatar's ties with Iran and Iraqi Shi'ite leaders have at times strained Doha's relations with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).[56]

In general, Iran has a strong presence in Doha: Iranian nationals make up about 10 percent of Qatar's foreign workers, Iranian merchants run successful businesses in Doha, and there is even a main market in the Qatari capital called Irani Bazaar.[57] Despite their ties, however, Qatari Shi'ites remain loyal to their state above all other foreign Shi'ite influences.

Is Sectarian Harmony in Oman, the UAE, and Qatar at Risk?

While the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein empowered Shi'ites in the Persian Gulf, the events also rekindled historical Sunni-Shi'ite divisions that have only worsened in the wake of the Arab Spring.[58] Saudi Arabia has been facing violent unrest, fomented with Iranian support, within its Shi'ite minority in the oil-rich Eastern Province.[59] The Al Khalifa royal

family in Bahrain, with the GCC's support, has brutally suppressed the protests of its Shi'ite majority population, who demand political reforms.[60] Renewed sectarian violence in Iraq killed more than 800 in August 2013 alone, and the crisis in Syria appears to be plunging the entire region into an all-out sectarian war.[61]

Although Oman, Qatar, and the UAE have not encountered Shi'ite uprisings, the growing sectarian strife in the region has already harmed the Sunni-Shi'ite harmony in these countries. Leaked US diplomatic cables show that UAE leaders are increasingly worried about not just Iran's nuclear ambition, but also its efforts to establish "emirates" in the Muslim world.[62] They fear that Iran may try to incite Emirati Shi'ites against the government and disturb the sectarian balance in the country.[63] In addition to the Iranian nationals, about 100,000 Lebanese live in the UAE.[64] As a result, the UAE government has recently restricted visas and expelled thousands of Shi'ites because of their perceived support for Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and the opposition in Bahrain. Moreover, UAE authorities have initiated restrictions on Shi'ite citizens: in 2012, authorities closed a Shi'ite religious seminary and denied UAE Shi'ites permission to host an international Shi'ite summit.[65]

The Qatari government has taken similar measures, including restricting Shi'ites' cultural and religious activities and limiting visas to foreign Shi'ites, particularly to those individuals from Iran and Lebanon.[66] Last June, the government reportedly expelled 18 Lebanese citizens after the GCC pledged to act against members of Hezbollah.[67] The GCC states are apparently exerting pressure on Lebanese Shi'ite migrants to punish Hezbollah's direct military support for the Syrian regime. The escalating sectarian rhetoric and punitive actions against Shi'ites in the Gulf are likely to radicalize the Shi'ite youth and allow Iran and Hezbollah to project themselves as the protectors of Shi'ites in the region. Many Shi'ites who despise the Iranian government and Hezbollah complain that they are unfairly subjected to "collective punishment" by Gulf monarchies and international sanctions.[68]

The rise of sectarianism is threatening the stability of the Middle East: not only does it benefit Iran and extremist Sunni and Shi'ite

groups, but it also undermines US national security interests in the region. In more stable states such as Oman, the UAE, and Qatar, the United States still has an opportunity to positively influence the Shi'ite communities to prevent them from becoming radicalized by the situations in Syria and Iran. Given the potential for Shi'ite-Sunni sectarianism to escalate, the United States must take a more active role in shaping Gulf-based Shi'ites' perceptions of their governments and the West.

To effectively enforce sanctions against Iran, the United States should encourage outreach to independent Shi'ite business communities and seek their aid in identifying and sanctioning individual entities owned by or affiliated with the Iranian government. This would require the United States to increase its intelligence assets in the UAE to make a distinction between licit and illicit trades, as well as between the Iranian government and private businesses. The United States must also work closely with all GCC leaders to ensure that all citizens—Shi'ites and other minorities included—are able to enjoy equal citizenship, political rights, and religious freedom. Whether Washington avails itself of these opportunities is an open question, and if history is any guide, the answer will be no. The field will remain open for Iran, and the United States must not rely on hope alone to ensure that these small states do not fall prey to the ill wind now blowing through the Middle East.

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Azerbaijan's Iran Problem

MICHAEL RUBIN

Since Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, it has been only the world's second Shi'ite-led state after Iran. Azerbaijan respects separation of mosque and state, and despite pressure from its neighbors, remains independent from political domination. Given its strategic importance, safeguarding the country's independence remains a US priority. And the threat from Iranian meddling is particularly acute. From Tehran's perspective, the combination of Azerbaijan's pre–19th-century Iranian past, modern Azerbaijan's embrace of secularism, and its relative economic success challenge Iran's legitimacy. As Iranian authorities have sought to undermine and destabilize Azerbaijan through political, clerical, charitable, and media channels, Azerbaijan's counterstrategy has been both restrained and effective.

Azerbaijan holds a unique position in the Islamic world as a majority Shi'ite state that is both run by Shi'ites and also respects the separation between mosque and state.[1] As a country that has at times been incorporated wholly into both Iran and Russia and, indeed, as the only state that borders both countries today, it also falls within both the Iranian and Russian concepts of their "near abroad," a sense that propels both Tehran and Moscow to seek influence in a manner that can undercut Azeri freedom and independence.

When Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, it became only the world's second Shi'ite-led state after the Islamic Republic of Iran. Certainly, Iraq and Bahrain were majority Shi'ite, but Sunni leaders ruled over those states, and in Bahrain they still do. Decades of Soviet rule had taken their toll on Azerbaijan. Imposed atheism had not eradicated Islam—Soviet authorities allowed some

manifestations of religious practice to continue—but the Soviets had frozen religious scholarship and eroded religiosity as the older, more traditional generation died out.

Independent Azerbaijan's reentrance into the Shi'ite world has at times been rocky. Iran's state-sanctioned, hardline clergy have persistently sought to fill the vacuum, often conflating the Iranian regime's own interpretation of Shi'ism with antagonism toward the West.[2] Shortly after Azerbaijan held its first postindependence parliamentary elections in 1995, the Islamic Republic's official *Iran News* chided Azerbaijan for its Western political and cultural orientation. "The Zionists and the pro-Zionist American lobby are active in Baku trying to safeguard their own financial interests rather than Azerbaijan's national and regional interests." These interests, the article continued, lay with Iran,[3] and *Abrar*, another hardline Iranian daily, declared the same day that a desire for "friendship and closeness with Iran [was] a sentiment that emanated from the hearts of the [Azerbaijani] people."[4]

The pressure from Iranian politicians continues. In May 2012, the Iranian government hung the flag of Azerbaijan upside down during a visit by the Azerbaijani defense minister to Tehran, so that a green band symbolizing Islam appeared on top.[5] On April 3, 2013, the Iranian daily *Kayhan*, whose editor—currently Hossein Shariatmadari—Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appoints and who Iran watchers both inside and outside the Islamic Republic therefore believe speaks for the Supreme Leader, published an official editorial calling for a referendum inside Azerbaijan on that country's reincorporation into Iran.[6] Just over one year later Iranian Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani lectured Azerbaijanis that only "promotion of Imams' teachings [will] lead to your country's blossoming."[7]

Politics of Clergy in Azerbaijan

The Soviet Union strictly regulated religion. Within the historically restive Caucasus, Soviet authorities appointed a Shi'ite theologian to lead the Muslim Spiritual Administration, under which a Sunni served as deputy. The leader provided administrative oversight to

the Soviet Union's various Shi'ite communities, while his deputy oversaw the Sunni communities of the Caucasus.[8] The collapse of the Soviet Union imbued the body with new importance as Muslim communities both grew and re-embraced their identity. For this, they relied largely on Allahshukur Pashazadeh, a native of Cil, a southern Azerbaijani village just 20 miles north of the Iranian border. Pashazadeh had long been active in Soviet-era religious bureaucracy. He had become chairman of the Caucasian Board of Muslims in 1980, and also served as the Sheikh ul-Islam of Azerbaijan. In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, he had also served as the chairman of the Muslims Advisory Council.

Following a tumultuous decade after regaining independence in which independent missionaries had free reign to proselytize in often radical directions, President Heydar Aliyev also created the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations to regulate and monitor religious activity. Islamic scholar Rafiq Aliyev was its inaugural head, but was replaced in 2006 by former presidential aide Hidayat Orucov. The committee has broad power over publication and dissemination of religious publications, and also registers places of worship.[9] A 2009 religion law requires all mosques to join the Caucasian Board of Muslims. The board has used its power to shut down mosques that agitate against the state.[10] While this is a common practice in the region and the broader Islamic world, it effectively drives radicals underground.

Pashazadeh has used his position as Azerbaijan's top religious cleric to promote tolerance, often calling upon religious leaders to unite to fight terrorism and separatism. He walks a tightrope, however, as he also frequently meets with Iranian officials and seeks to ameliorate them, at times and at least according to Iranian sources, by embracing some Iranian positions. He has, for example, endorsed Tehran's conference on the Palestinian Intifada, an annual event in which Islamist radicals demand Israel's annihilation.[11]

Iranian authorities are unwilling to accept mere lip service, however. While they have modulated pressure with time, the Iranian government still seeks a more radical future for Azerbaijan. In July 2005, Azerbaijani security forces raided the Juma Mosque in Baku's ancient

old city to curtail the increasingly radical preaching by Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, an Iran-trained preacher.[12] More recently, Tehran's main tool for this effort has been Sheikh Taleh Bagirov, a 29-year-old cleric who from 2005 to 2010 studied in Qom, Iran's main clerical center.

Upon his return to Azerbaijan in 2011, Bagirov began preaching at the Hazrat Abulfaz Aga Mosque, often targeting the moderate positions of state religious bodies. He also began to agitate against the ban on headscarves in schools, a regulation Azerbaijan upholds to prevent coercion by religious radicals against schoolgirls, eventually receiving 18 months imprisonment.[13] Incarceration did not moderate him. Upon his release he used his sermons to attack the government. "No matter how many evil-doers there are in this world, how many men in black masks and guns, Allah is with us. You have stolen people's land, you have stolen the oil, and you still sit there with no one to say anything to you," he declared in one sermon. "Now you want to rule in the mosque too? No matter how influential an official is, he cannot rule inside the mosque."[14]

The Nardaran Flashpoint

Bagirov has his power base in Nardaran, a small town on the Abşeron peninsula just 16 miles northeast of Baku. A nondescript suburb but for Hezbollah's flag flying from buildings and pro-Iranian graffiti on compound walls, it has for well over a decade been a flashpoint for agitation that is both pro-Iranian and against the Azerbaijani government. Its atmosphere of strict Islamic conservatism stands in sharp contrast to the rest of Azerbaijan.[15] Nardaran was, in 1991, the birthplace of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), which supports closer relations between Tehran and Baku; promotes an anti-West, anti-Israel platform; and is often at the center of antigovernment agitation.

The IPA campaigned against the Azerbaijani government's efforts to ban the rebroadcast of Iranian television inside Azerbaijan, but suffered a blow in 1995 after the Azerbaijani government passed a law banning clerics from running for political office.[16] That same year Azerbaijani security arrested several party leaders on accusations

of spying for Iran and seeking to overthrow the government, after which they stripped the IPA of registration. The lack of legal status, however, did not end the IPA; it has continued its activities illegally and with the support of Iran to the present day.

In 2002, protests over lack of services and employment led to an escalating series of clashes with police. A truce negotiated by Pashazadeh restored an uneasy calm in February 2003, but protests re-erupted in 2006 after locals responded violently to an article in Sanat, an obscure newspaper that blamed Islam for Azerbaijan's lack of economic development.[17]

The crisis was entirely manufactured by Nardaran's radicals and their supporters in the Islamic Republic. After the article appeared, Islamists from Nardaran wrote to Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Fazel Lankarani, a strong supporter of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's philosophy and the product of a Persian mother and Azerbaijani father, explaining, "Recently one of the Azeri newspapers . . . published an article from Rafiq Tağı, an apostate journalist causing fury and wrath among Muslims of the region." They continued falsely, "The writer of the article is trying to conclude with his analysis that Europe and its religion, Christianity are superior in all aspects to the Middle East and its religion, Islam. He describes Islam as inferior to Christianity in all aspects. In a section of his article he has insulted the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and ridiculed all sanctities of Islam." They asked, "What is the duty of Muslims with regard to this unbearable issue?" Lankarani answered, "He is considered as someone who has insulted the Prophet and in any case, given his confessions, it is necessary for every individual who has an access to him to kill him. The person in charge of the said newspaper, who published such thoughts and beliefs consciously and knowingly, should be dealt with in the same manner."[18]

The Iranian government was wholly behind the crisis, which became the Azerbaijani equivalent of the 1989 Salman Rushdie crisis, when Ayatollah Khomeini called for the British Indian author to be killed for his alleged blasphemy. Just as Khomeini's call for Rushdie's murder rallied both Islamic and Western liberals to Rushdie's defense, so too did the Lankarani *fatwa* rally Azeri intellectuals. Forty

prominent Azeri scholars and civil society leaders published an open letter calling for Iran to cease its support for religious extremists inside Azerbaijan.[19] There the similarity ends, however. For while Rushdie remains a free man and increasingly public figure, assassins ambushed Tağı in a Baku parking lot on November 19, 2011; he succumbed to his stab wounds four days later.

In January 2011, Azeri authorities arrested several dozen IPA activists after party chairmen Movsum Samadov called for the overthrow of the Azeri government. "The Azerbaijani people should rise and put an end to the despotic regime and the leader with a face of Yazid," he declared, comparing President Ilham Aliyev to an early Islamic caliph despised by Shi'ites for killing revered Imam Hussein bin Ali.[20] The following day, on January 7, an Azeri court charged Samadov with plotting to create mass unrest and perpetrate terrorism.[21] Then, between March 2011 and March 2012, Azerbaijani authorities arrested 40 locals—most IPA activists—whom they accused of spying for Iran or planning sabotage against the Eurovision contest to which Baku played host in May 2012.[22]

In March 2013 protests re-erupted in Nardaran after Azeri forces rearrested Bagirov for possession of heroin, a charge that his supporters say the state based on planted evidence.[23] Protesters not only chanted, "Down with corrupt officials of Azerbaijan," but also took up the common Iranian regime refrains, "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."[24] Members of parliament accused Iran of seeking to infiltrate mosques to incite supporters against the Azerbaijani government and to promote radicalism in response.[25]

Iranian Soft Power

Beyond sponsoring political proxies, agitators, and activist clergy, the Islamic Republic also employs charities to further its influence. Initially, the Iranian government and regime-linked charities began building mosques and sponsoring Iranian-trained mullahs. As of 2008, there were 200–250 Azerbaijani students studying in Qom's religious seminaries.[26] Rather than provide scholarships directly, Iranian-sponsored mosques throughout Azerbaijan often

apply religious donations to send Azerbaijani students to Iranian seminaries.[27]

Tehran also dispatched the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), the regime's chief external aid agency, to Azerbaijan, where it won hearts and minds by providing services to refugees displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh following the Armenian invasion and occupation of that territory.[28] This, of course, was ironic given that Iran largely sided with Armenia against Azerbaijan as a means to keep the Islamic Republic's Shi'ite competition weak and in check.

With assets supplied by the Supreme Leader, the IKRC has also sponsored programs similar to those conducted by Western non-governmental organizations, providing, for example, assistance with housing, food aid, and vocational training, even if some of its activities took on a religious hue.[29] While such activities might look benign, the IKRC's track record is more sinister. In 2010, the US Department of the Treasury designated its branch in Lebanon as a terrorist entity because of its financial and operational inks to Hezbollah.[30] With both the Revolutionary Guards and Relief Committee funded from the same trough, it is possible that committee offices in Azerbaijan now also provide cover for Revolutionary Guards operations. This fact certainly has not been lost on Azerbaijani authorities who have kept IKRC offices and other Iranian charities under close surveillance and have, on occasion, closed IKRC projects. However, the Iranian government maintains pressure on Baku to reopen its offices and projects when shuttered.[31]

As with Bahrain and Iraq, the Islamic Republic also makes ample use of its media to extend its influence in Azerbaijan. Iranian propaganda is often sophisticated. Rather than confront the Ilham Aliyev government head on, Iranian media often adapt the theme that Iran can best protect Azerbaijani interests. The Iranian-based Sahar television broadcasts regionally in both Azeri and Talysh, and carries not only religious programming but also music and sports. News broadcasts regularly disparage the United States and Israel and condemn the supposed moral laxness and inequity of Western society, while depicting Iran's Shi'ite culture as liberated and free.[32]

While such media may have some impact over time, the basic fact

that Azerbaijan enjoys greater social freedom undercuts the effectiveness of the Iranian media campaign. Whereas in 1991 Baku paled in comparison to Tabriz, the capital of Iranian Azerbaijan and once the capital of Iran itself, in recent years Baku has surpassed Tabriz both in quality of life and affluence. This is a fact not lost to tens of thousands of Iranian tourists and vacationers who visit Baku for holidays and during Nowruz—Persian New Year—celebrations. Iranian accents are rife in Baku's restaurants and Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea beach resorts, as Iranian women enjoy the opportunity—literally—to let down their veil and enjoy the equality with which Azerbaijan empowers women.

The Politics of Trade

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon—states in which Tehran seeks diplomatic dominance—Iranian companies often flood the markets with cheap foodstuffs and manufactured goods. This is deliberate, as Khatam al-Anbia, the economic wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, dominates Iranian manufacturing and trade.[33] If trade is a metric of influence, then declining trade between Iran and Azerbaijan reflects diplomatic difficulties. While the Islamic Republic was a leading trading partner for Azerbaijan in the 1990s, over the past decade the Iranian share of the Azerbaijani market has declined. Bilateral trade in 2007 was $540 million, but by 2011 it was only $305 million, representing a mere 0.8 percent of Azerbaijan's total trade.[34] While the figures cited—without sourcing—by some Iranian officials are slightly higher, they still represent only a miniscule portion of Azerbaijan's total trade.[35]

The Iranian government will be unlikely to significantly bolster its trade with Azerbaijan until Iran tempers its often aggressive behavior in the Caspian Sea. The core of the Iran-Azerbaijan maritime dispute is whether the Caspian Sea is a sea or lake: if a sea, then international precedents determine the extent of territorial waters; if a lake, then the Caspian might be divided like a pie.[36] The littoral states have negotiated a complex series of interweaving bilateral and multilateral treaties that differentiate between the waters of the Caspian and

the oil-rich seabed. Of the five littoral states, all but Turkmenistan have agreed to demarcate the waters as if the Caspian were a lake, albeit one with a shared center. With just 13 percent of the Caspian coastline, Iran also refuses to accept the decision of the other littoral states that the seabed should be treated as if the Caspian were a sea, for that would limit Iranian drilling offshore in what would then become Azerbaijan's territorial waters. That Azerbaijan's Abşeron juts 37 miles into the Caspian only extends Azerbaijan's territorial waters under such a division.

Rather than resolve the dispute, however, Iran has resorted to military force to encroach on what otherwise would be Azerbaijani territorial waters. In 2001, an Iranian naval vessel confronted an Azeri vessel doing research for British Petroleum inside Azeri waters.[37] In 2009, Iranian vessels towed a drilling rig into waters claimed by Azerbaijan and proceeded to drill for oil.[38]

In May 2012, Iran announced that it had discovered a 10 billion–barrel oil deposit, the first new Caspian field in more than a century.[39] Iranian oil minister Rostam Qasemi claimed sole ownership: "Sardar Jangal . . . is within Iran's territory. It belongs to our country."[40] The problem was that the oil field was in waters Azerbaijan claims. Tehran has been willing to use its military to enforce its claims. While Azerbaijan has sought to purchase US-made patrol boats to help defend its territorial water, American Armenian activists have sidelined any US military assistance to Baku, even that which could not be used against Armenian forces occupying Nagorno-Karabakh. Rather than fold to such Iranian pressure, the Azerbaijani government has responded by redoubling efforts to establish cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.[41]

Conclusion

Wedged between two domineering powers and with Armenian forces occupying seven districts beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan straddles religious, sectarian, and geopolitical fault lines. That Azerbaijan remains independent from the political domination of its neighbors continues to be an immutable US interest. While Russia

might believe it should have preponderant influence in Azerbaijan because of its Soviet heritage, the Iranian challenge is in many ways more serious. Simply put, the combination of Azerbaijan's pre–19th-century Iranian past, modern Azerbaijan's embrace of secularism, and independent Azerbaijan's relative economic success challenge the very legitimacy of Iran's Islamic Republic. After all, if Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution brought divinely inspired rule to Iran, then Iran's ruling clerics must explain why Azerbaijanis increasingly have a higher quality of life and are on a trajectory to surpass Iran's per capita income.

In response to the challenge, Iranian authorities have sought to undermine and destabilize Azerbaijan by seeking to co-opt the religious sphere. Azerbaijan's state oversight of religious institutions has contained the challenge. While dissident clerics might appeal to human rights activists and embassies with regard to the alleged discrimination they face at state hands, the rhetoric of these clerics delivered to their own constituents belies any notion that they subscribe to liberal or democratic values. Simply put, given the persistent pressure and security challenge Baku faces from Tehran, the Azerbaijani government's strategy has been both restrained and effective.

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The Shi'ites of Pakistan: A Minority under Siege

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While the world has understandably focused on al Qaeda–linked terrorism in Pakistan's tribal region, escalating sectarian violence against the country's Shi'ite minority has largely been overlooked. On June 8, in the latest episode of anti-Shi'ite violence, gunmen and suicide bombers belonging to a banned Sunni outfit called Jaish-ul-Islam, or the Army of Islam, killed at least two dozen Shi'ite pilgrims in Pakistan's restive Baluchistan Province. Over the past five years, radical Sunni groups have killed more than 2,000 Shi'ites across the country, forced hundreds of thousands more to leave their communities, and turned Shi'ite religious ceremonies into scenes of dreadful carnage.[1]

So far, a great majority of the Shi'ite community have shown commendable restraint, resisted foreign interference, continued to associate themselves with mainstream political parties, and remained loyal to the Pakistani state. The emergence of small yet dangerous Shi'ite militant outfits, however, signals that the younger generation is losing patience and is at risk of radicalization and being influenced by Iran. Left unchecked, the rising tide of sectarianism could destabilize the nuclear-armed nation, with dangerous ramifications for regional stability and American national security.

For the first three decades of Pakistan's existence (1947–77), Shi'ite-Sunni differences were marginal: across the country, Shi'ites coexisted peacefully with the Sunni majority and practiced their faith freely and openly. In fact, the Pakistani Shi'ite community—the largest in the world except for Iran's—played a significant role in the creation of Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder, and

many of his political aides were from the Shi'ite sect, although they pursued a secular and nonsectarian agenda to unite the Muslims of India under the banner of Pakistan.[2] After Jinnah's death, the Shi'ites continued to remain influential in the political sphere, serving as presidents, prime ministers, and chiefs of the armed forces.

Constituting around one-fifth of Pakistan's population of 180 million, Shi'ites are spread across the country, with the largest concentrations in the cities of Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Jhang, Peshawar, Parachinar, Kohat, and Quetta.[3] In the semiautonomous northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan, Shi'ites make up a majority of the population.[4] Pakistani Shi'ites are also ethnically and linguistically diverse; they are represented in all of the country's largest ethnic groups, including Punjabis, Sindhis, and Pashtuns. The Persian-speaking Hazara ethnic minority in Baluchistan Province is predominantly Shi'ite.[5]

In religious matters, most Pakistani Shi'ites adhere to the Twelver school of thought, but there are also smaller branches of Ismaili Shi'ites.[6] In the political sphere, most Shi'ites are part of the mainstream nonsectarian political parties, a majority of which are members of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Indeed, the rule of former prime minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971–77), a Shi'ite and PPP's founder, "marked the pinnacle of Shia power in Pakistan and the high point of the promise of inclusive Muslim nationalism."[7]

The Rise of Shi'ite-Sunni Hostilities

Since the late 1970s, however, three key developments inflamed Shi'ite-Sunni tensions in Pakistan: General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's ascension to power, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and Pakistan's proxy wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

After Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq deposed the elected Bhutto government in the summer of 1977, he implemented a radical "Islamization" agenda that strengthened Sunni extremist groups, alienated the Shi'ite minority, and harmed sectarian harmony in Pakistan forever. Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization efforts—often described by Shi'ites as "Sunnification"—encompassed all spheres of the Pakistani state

and society: he imposed religious tax [*zakat*], abolished interest, introduced puritanical religious punishments such as flogging and death by stoning, incorporated Sharia law into schools' curricula, and courted religious scholars for political support and ideological inspiration. He also invited foreign Sunni activists and preachers to come to Pakistan, turning the country into a headquarters for global Islamic activism and extremist ideology. While Zia-ul-Haq's policies drew support from Sunni religious groups, they aroused the ire of the Shi'ite community.[8]

Empowered and politicized by the success of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Pakistani Shi'ites opposed Zia-ul-Haq's compulsory *zakat* decree, reasoning that Shi'ite jurisprudence dictated religious tax be given to the religious establishment [*marja'iyya*] rather than to the government. It was not a coincidence that within months of the Iranian revolution, more than 100,000 Shi'ites from across Pakistan gathered in Punjab, the country's most populous province, demanding the inclusion of Shi'ite laws into the legal system and uniting under a new organization called the Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Fiqh-e Jafari (TNFJ).

A year later, more than 200,000 Shi'ites held a protest rally in Islamabad and brought the capital under a virtual siege. The Shi'ites' projection of power and a stern warning to Zia-ul-Haq by Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ultimately forced the Pakistani leader to back down and exempt the Shi'ites from *zakat*.[9] The triumph of Shi'ite protests with Iranian assistance, however, infuriated Pakistan's Sunni religious groups and set the stage for armed confrontation between the two sects.

Before Khomeini took power in Iran, Pakistani Shi'ites lacked a united political organization, and their leaders were predominantly involved in educational and religious activities.[10] The new regime in Tehran, however, dispatched its revolutionary agents disguised as diplomats and cultural attachés across Pakistan to mobilize and unite the Shi'ite communities.

Tehran established cultural centers in Pakistan's largest cities of Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta, from which Iranian agents not just distributed Khomeini's work among Pakistani

Shi'ites but also offered as many as 4,000 Pakistani Shi'ites scholarships to study Khomeini's concept of Guardianship of the Jurisprudent [*Vilayat-e-Faqih*] in Iran. Upon returning to Pakistan, these students were ardent supporters of Khomeini's ideology and pursued a revolutionary goal of changing their societies through political activism and, at times, militant activity.[11]

The Iranian outreach had some success. While a great majority of Pakistani Shi'ites historically followed Iraq's Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei as *marja'iyya*, after 1979, many began to follow Iran's Khomeini in political and religious matters, and in the following years, Qom replaced Najaf as the main center of learning for Pakistani Shi'ites. The Imamia Students Organisation (ISO) was the first influential Shi'ite group to publicly accept Khomeini as *marja'iyya*.[12] At present, between 50 and 70 percent of all Shi'ite students in Pakistan are members of the ISO, which operates in all four provinces.[13] Although ISO leaders deny that the organization is politically affiliated with or accepts funding from Iran, they admit that the ISO receives "ideological inspiration" from Khamenei.[14]

Not all Shi'ite groups embraced Iran, however. In fact, Tehran's overt interference split the Pakistani Shi'ite community into two camps: the Iranian-supported revolutionaries versus the traditionalists, who resisted Tehran's influence. The revolutionaries were young students from the ISO and a group of clerical leaders who had studied in theological centers in Iran. After the death of Mufti Jafar Hussain, the leader of TNFJ, Khomeini appointed Arif Hussain al-Hussaini as his representative to lead the Shi'ite community in Pakistan.

Hussaini, a Turi Pashtun from Kurram Agency, had cultivated close ties with Khomeini both in Najaf and Qom. Described as the "architect of Shia radicalism in Pakistan," Hussaini transformed Pakistan's predominantly quietist Shi'ite community into an assertive political force that challenged both the government and traditional Shi'ite clergy. He openly preached Khomeini's ideology among Pakistani Shi'ites and urged his followers to emulate the Iranian leader for political and religious guidance.[15]

The Iranian influence was on open display in 1986 when Khamenei, then Iran's president, paid a historic visit to Pakistan. According

to a leaked US diplomatic cable, both TNFJ and ISO, with funding from wealthy Pakistani Shi'ites and the Iranian government, mobilized thousands of their supporters to welcome the Iranian leader and erected pro-Iran posters in the country's major cities. The crowds chanted anti-American slogans, and some Shi'ites disrespected Zia-ul-Haq by barricading his car and making obscene gestures, prompting the Pakistani leader to order a probe into the funding and operations of the Shi'ite organizations.[16]

Despite ISO's and TNFJ's efforts, however, a majority of Pakistani Shi'ites preserved their political independence and South Asian religious and cultural heritage. For example, they ignored Islamic religious decrees [*fatwas*] by Khomeini and Khamenei on Muharram rituals.[17]

Iran's growing power in Pakistan enraged both Pakistani Sunni religious groups and Persian Gulf Sunni monarchies. To counter Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia substantially increased financial support for the Pakistani Sunni religious organizations.[18] Pakistani Sunni religious parties, too, saw the Shi'ite political mobilization as an Iranian project, and in 1985, hardliners created Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) in Punjab, which drew support from local Sunni peasants and the government, and launched a series of terrorist attacks against Shi'ite leaders and Iranian diplomats across the country. In retaliation, a group of radical Shi'ites defected from the ISO and created their own militant group, Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (SMP), which engaged in a deadly cycle of tit-for-tat attacks against the SSP throughout the 1990s.[19]

In addition to the Iranian interference and Zia-ul-Haq's policies, Islamabad's support for militant groups in Afghanistan and Kashmir during the 1980s and the 1990s also contributed to deepening Shi'ite-Sunni divisions in Pakistan. With massive financial aid from the United States and Saudi Arabia, Zia-ul-Haq built a network of training camps on Pakistani soil for the anti-Soviet Afghan *mujahideen* and anti-Indian terrorist groups. Radical Sunni preachers and militants, including future al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, found sanctuary in Pakistan, and Islamic seminaries [*madrassas*] became incubators for sectarianism and terrorism. After the Soviet

withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, many of the Pakistani militant groups turned their attention to Shi'ites.

Post-2001 Violence against Shi'ites

The US-led war on terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks provided Pakistani Shi'ites a temporary reprieve from radical Sunni aggression. In January 2002, under pressure from Washington, then–president Pervez Musharraf banned most militant groups including sectarian parties such as SSP, SMP, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

However, Musharraf's crackdown appeared to be more a tactical gesture to ease external pressure than a strategic decision to clamp down on militancy at home. Soon, the government released most of the 2,000 militants associated with banned terrorist outfits; while some of these outfits were allowed to operate freely under pseudonyms, others relocated to Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and strengthened ties with al Qaeda and other militant groups in the region.[20] In October 2002, for example, SSP's leader, Azam Tariq, was permitted to contest the parliamentary elections from his jail cell; later that month, he was released.[21]

Since Musharraf's ouster in 2008, sectarian attacks against the Shi'ites have risen rapidly. Although anti-Shi'ite violence has engulfed all corners of Pakistan, Shi'ite communities in four regions have borne the brunt of sectarian terrorism: Kurram Agency in the FATA; Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan Province; Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and financial hub; and the semiautonomous Gilgit Baltistan. In 2013, according to a report by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, sectarian attacks across Pakistan increased by 53 percent, with more than 85 percent of them in the four previously mentioned regions.[22]

In the past decade, FATA has become a sanctuary for the most dangerous regional and international terrorist organizations including al Qaeda, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Haqqani network, and Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LeJ), a splinter of the SSP and the most brutal anti-Shi'ite group in South Asia. According to unofficial estimates, more than 2,000 Shi'ites have been killed in Kurram Agency in recent years.

In Parachinar, the agency's capital city where Shi'ites make up half of the population, sectarian groups have launched a vicious campaign of killing, kidnapping, intimidation, and expulsion of Shi'ite residents.[23] The strategic proximity of Parachinar to the Afghan capital city of Kabul also makes local Shi'ites prone to attacks by Taliban groups that use the area as a corridor to enter Afghanistan.

In 2007, after a spate of terrorist attacks that killed scores of Shi'ites, a small group of Parachinar Shi'ites responded to the Sunni violence by creating Kurram Hezbollah and Mahdi Militia, which are named after Shi'ite militant groups in Lebanon and Iraq, respectively. The two militant outfits—which, according to Sunni groups, received funding and weapons from Iran—reportedly voluntarily disbanded in 2010 after the government pledged to guarantee their community's security. However, after the killing of 60 Shi'ites in an attack there last summer, local Shi'ite leaders sought the government's permission to reactivate local militias to protect themselves. "We are under a siege, and we want our voluntarily armed people to provide security for us," said Ali Bangash, a Shi'ite leader in the region.[24]

Another particularly vulnerable Shi'ite community is the Hazara ethnic group in Quetta. While the city has gained notoriety for hosting the Afghan Taliban's leadership council, sectarian groups, primarily the LeJ, have also established bases there and are operating with impunity. The 0.5 million Hazara Shi'ites account for about a quarter of the city's population, hold senior positions in the local government, and own a quarter of businesses in the area.[25]

In recent years, however, Hazaras have left en masse. Since 1999, Sunni sectarian groups have killed at least 1,000 Hazaras in Quetta and forced more than 200,000 to relocate to other Pakistani cities or migrate abroad. Hazara leaders allege that the government is either unwilling or unable to crack down on terrorist groups; others accuse the Pakistani spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of complicity: "Police fail to arrest them; the judiciary also refuses to punish them; legislation is not passed in the assemblies; and the secret agencies give them freedom," complained Sajad Changezi, a local Shi'ite leader.[26]

Still others blame outsiders for the carnage. "Hazaras are paying the price for Iran–Saudi Arabia enmity," said Abdul Khaliq Hazara, the leader of the Hazara Democratic Party. Some also argue that without the government's complicity, Punjab-based LeJ would not have been able to become influential and effective in Baluchistan.[27]

Anti-Shi'ite groups in Baluchistan are also linked with al Qaeda and the TTP. Usman Kurd, the LeJ's operational commander in Baluchistan, and his deputy, Dawood Badini, both have close ties with al Qaeda; Badini is a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the architect of the 9/11 attacks.[28]

Sectarianism, however, is not confined to remote regions. Groups such as the SSP, LeJ, and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammat have in recent years wreaked havoc on Karachi, home to 20 million people and responsible for half of Pakistan's government revenue. According to Amanullah Mehsud, a member of the Awami National Party, terrorist groups control about 20 percent of the city. Although Pakistani security authorities deny the claim, they acknowledge that local criminal groups have for mutual interests teamed up with the Taliban and sectarian groups.[29]

Fearing murder, kidnapping, and discrimination, Shi'ites are increasingly relocating from Sunni-majority residential areas to Shi'ite neighborhoods. "The multiculturalism that once defined Karachi . . . has simply disappeared from the city," said one urban planner.[30]

The rise in anti-Shi'ite violence across Pakistan has also provided Iran an opportunity to exploit Shi'ite grievances for political ends. Recently and with alleged Iranian support, the rapid growth of SMP has exacerbated the situation in Karachi. On January 26, Karachi's Criminal Investigation Department arrested two serial killers who had received "sectarian terrorism training in Iran."[31] The Iranian media and religious leaders frequently deplore the plight of Shi'ites in Quetta and Parachinar, calling the latter the "Shi'ite Gaza" or "second Gaza" in Pakistan.[32]

Rhetoric aside, the Iranian government's response has been reserved, and Tehran has done little to alleviate Shi'ite suffering next door. As a result, the Pakistani Shi'ite community largely distrusts

Iran and do not consider the Iranian regime as their benefactor and protector.[33] One reason Iran does not aggressively inflame sectarianism in Pakistan is perhaps that, as history shows, the Shi'ite minority will most likely end up losing. Moreover, suffering international isolation and a Sunni militancy in its eastern borders, Tehran does not want to antagonize Islamabad by getting heavily involved in Pakistan's domestic affairs.

What Should Be Done?

The return of democracy has not helped tackle sectarianism and terrorism in Pakistan over the past six years. The government of former president Asif Ali Zardari (2008–13) almost entirely delegated counterterrorism policies to the Pakistani military establishment, and his successor, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has performed equally feebly so far. As a result, terrorist safe havens in FATA remain intact, sectarian groups operate with impunity throughout the country, and the military establishment still supports terrorist groups fighting in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

For the Shi'ites, most worrisome of all is the deep-rooted nexus between the government and sectarian groups. It is not just the ISI that nurtures anti-Shi'ite outfits but also the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) party, which openly courts sectarian groups for political support. In February 2010, for example, Rana Sanaullah Khan, the PML-N's law minister in Punjab, campaigned for by-election in the Jhang District with SSP leader Maulana Muhammad Ahmad Ludhianvi.

Punjab's chief minister, Shahbaz Sharif, who is Nawaz Sharif's brother, once pleaded with the Taliban to "spare Punjab" because his party shared the Taliban's anti-Western agenda. In the past, the Punjab government has also come under scrutiny for allocating large sums of money for Lashkar-e Taiba, a group responsible for many deadly attacks in India, and for LeJ's leader, Malik Ishaq.[34]

Barring a firm government action against militant groups, sectarian violence is likely to increase and destabilize Pakistan. The resurgence of Shi'ite militant organizations, with alleged Iranian

assistance, is an alarming indication that some Shi'ites have lost confidence in the government's ability and will to curb violence and are therefore resorting to militancy and to looking for patrons abroad.

In addition, the Pakistani government's fateful decision to join the sectarian fray in Syria is feared to exacerbate Shi'ite-Sunni tension in Pakistan. Riyadh has reportedly bought small Pakistani weapons and recruited retired Pakistani army personnel to train rebels in Syria and assist the Bahraini government in suppressing a largely Shi'ite opposition. These measures have already strained relations between Islamabad and Tehran and angered the Pakistani Shi'ite community.[35]

To combat sectarianism, the Pakistani political and military leadership must devise a comprehensive plan that includes reforming the education system, closing pro-militancy *madrassas*, curbing foreign funding for extremist groups, and implementing deradicalization programs to promote interfaith harmony. According to a leaked US diplomatic cable, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates provide about $100 million annually to extremist networks in southern Punjab, where young children are recruited and "indoctrinated into jihadi philosophy."[36]

The government should also take firm action against hate speech by sectarian groups, which describes Shi'ites as infidels and publicly calls for making Pakistan a graveyard for all Shi'ites.[37] In a clear departure from past Shi'ite-Sunni harmony in Pakistan, a 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that 41 percent of Pakistani Sunnis did not consider Shi'ites Muslims.[38] Other religious minorities in Pakistan—such as Ahmadiyyas, Hindus, Christians, and Barelvi Sunnis—are victims of similar propaganda and violence.

The United States, too, must not ignore the growing Sunni-Shi'ite violence in Pakistan. Sunni sectarian groups are not just massacring the Shi'ites but they are also closely linking with al Qaeda and other regional terrorist groups and have been involved in terrorist attacks in India and Afghanistan. Continued sectarian strife undermines Pakistan's stability and allows Saudi Arabia and Iran to support both Sunni and Shi'ite radicals, and as American troops prepare to leave Afghanistan by year's end, the sectarian conflict could engulf Afghanistan and the broader region.

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Conclusion: Winning the Shi'ites Can Checkmate Iran

MICHAEL RUBIN

Less than four decades ago, Iran was one of America's chief allies in the Middle East. American and Iranian generals, diplomats, and businessmen wined and dined together. That these officials were Shi'ites mattered little. Indeed, most Americans understood Shi'ites to be more cosmopolitan and tolerant than the Sunnis with whom they interacted elsewhere in the Middle East. And, until the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps created Hezbollah, helped defeat its rivals, and moved to impose its leadership on Lebanon's Shi'ite community, Lebanese Shi'ites were also friendly with the West. Shi'ite hostility toward the United States today is more an anomaly than a reflection of history. Shi'ites may never be wholly be pro-American, but they need not be anti-American.

Demonizing Shi'ites as Iranian puppets is not only inaccurate but also counterproductive because it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy by which some Shi'ites—especially those who feel themselves under siege by Sunni sectarian forces—feel they have no other choice but to accept Iranian protection even though they resent the price Iran seeks to extract in exchange.

Most Shi'ite communities outside Iran, however, resent the Iranian clerical regime and in some cases Iran itself in regards to culture, politics, and religion. They have their own unique identities that do not depend on religion. Indeed, across the Middle East and broader Islamic (and, for that matter, non-Islamic) world, it is always dangerous to try to boil identity down to a single variable.

Rather than concede and condemn Shi'ites to Iranian influence or bless injustices they may face at the hands of sectarian governments, it is essential that the United States court and coopt each community to not only ensure religious freedom and liberty but also check Iranian influence, which fundamentally undercuts such values. Here, it is important that the United States recognize the diversity of various Shi'ite communities and calibrate policies geared to the unique features of each one.

- **Iraq:** The United States should recognize that Iranian government poses a mutual challenge to both Iraq and Iran. Iraq shares a more than 900-mile border with Iran, so the two countries will have extensive relations. The theological rigidity of the Iranian regime, however, stands in sharp contrast to the more vibrant religious debate that occurs inside Iraq, where the religious hierarchy remains independent of government. Enabling space for independent theological debate to occur is a US interest, as it both encourages moderation and undercuts the legitimacy of Iran's supreme leader. The way to accomplish this is simple: have as broad as possible a relationship with Iraq by encouraging American business and working with the Iraqi government to provide as many consultants as possible and station soldiers to provide training and conduct exercises. The more engaged the United States is, the more independent space it will allow the Iraqi government to develop by enabling it to play Iranian and American interests off one another.

- **Lebanon:** Breaking Hezbollah's monopoly not only benefits American national security but also strengthens Lebanon's independence and augments the freedom of Lebanon's Shi'ite community. Make no mistake: Hezbollah remains ultimately under the thumb of Iran's supreme leader and has not morphed into an independent entity motivated solely by Lebanese nationalism. For most Shi'ites, however, the debate about whether Hezbollah is a terrorist group and Iranian proxy or not is moot. Hezbollah, for them, is a mafia that prevents them from building

business and bettering their lives. Rather than treat all Lebanese Shi'ites with suspicion, a more agile American policy would be to work with Lebanon's middle class and independent businessmen to strengthen their political base while encouraging electoral reforms. This would allow Lebanese Shi'ites to cast their ballots where they reside and so not fall prey to Hezbollah literally blocking the roads to ancestral villages.

- **Bahrain:** Shi'ite grievances in Bahrain are legitimate and are not simply the result of Iranian provocations. The situation will remain volatile until the Bahraini government provides Shi'ites with equal opportunities economically, politically, and socially. The Bahraini king and prime minister's willingness to substitute the threat of Saudi military power to substantial reform not only facilitates Iranian influence among Bahraini Shi'ites but also threatens to undercut Bahrain's traditional moderation and rich culture. It will take more than a succession to the throne to calm the situation; improvement might require fundamental constitutional reform by which the royal family maintains control over foreign policy and defense, while a fully elected parliament controls the budget and all domestic issues.

- **Saudi Arabia:** Nowhere do Shi'ites face more repression than in Saudi Arabia. Shi'ites pose no threat to the Saudi government. They remain a minority seeking basic religious liberty. There is no reason why the United States should not advocate on their behalf, just as there is no reason why American diplomats should not advocate on behalf of religious liberty for Sunni Muslims, Bahais, and evangelical Christians in Iran. Likewise, the United States should urge Riyadh to reverse its policy of economic deprivation in the Eastern Province, a policy which grates at Saudi Shi'ites given that the region they occupy provides the bulk of Saudi Arabia's oil wealth.

- **Kuwait:** Kuwait faces the same sectarian strain as do Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Rather than relying on repression, however,

Kuwait provides a model for promoting tolerance by recognizing that incitement can occur on both sides of the sectarian prism. Nevertheless, Kuwait illustrates the challenge posed by political reform: democratization and tolerance are often mutually exclusive. While democratization and liberalism will strengthen Kuwait in the long term, it remains essential that the United States recognize the challenge sectarianism poses and also help Kuwait rebuff Iranian and Saudi attempts to aggravate sectarian trends.

- **Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman:** Unlike their neighbors in the Persian Gulf, the nations of Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have not faced sectarian violence in the wake of the Arab Spring. This is because the three Sunni monarchies have successfully integrated their Shi'ite populations and have given them little reason to resort to violence or look for political patronage abroad. However, the Sunni-Shi'ite stability in UAE and Qatar appears to be at risk as Syria's sectarian war expands across the broader Middle East. The United States should work with the Emirati, Qatari, and Omani governments to ensure that Shi'ites and other minorities enjoy equal political and religious rights and that these small states do not fall prey to the rising tide of sectarianism that has rocked the Middle East. At the same time, the United States should support the intelligence and security agencies of all three states to prevent Iran from utilizing Shi'ite guest workers as provocateurs.

- **Azerbaijan:** Azerbaijan is the anti-Iran. Both are majority-Shi'ite and Shi'ite-governed. While Iran has embraced theocracy, Azerbaijan has embraced secularism. While Iran continues to repress women and minorities, Azerbaijan nurtures both. While Iran seeks to control the Internet, Azerbaijan embraces it. That does not mean Azerbaijan is a beacon of democracy; it is not, and its democratic deficit is large and perhaps growing. But it remains essential that the United States partner closely with Azerbaijan, even while nudging it gently. Given how Azerbaijan—and its

philosophy of pro-Western secularism—antagonize both Russia and Iran, it is essential that the United States impose no demand for reform that could destabilize the country.

- **Pakistan:** Pakistan is home to the world's second-largest Shi'ite community after Iran. While al Qaeda–linked terrorism in Pakistan often makes international headlines, the world community has remarked little on the murder of more than 2,000 Shi'ites over the past five years. Islamabad and Washington must not overlook the danger of sectarianism that threatens to destabilize Pakistan and the broader region. Sunni sectarian organizations are not just murdering Shi'ites; they are closely linked with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in the region. More ominously, as the Pakistani government becomes entangled in the sectarian conflicts in Syria and Bahrain at the behest of Saudi Arabia, it risks exacerbating sectarian divisions on its soil. The United States must help Pakistan reform its education system, condition aid on the closure of religious seminaries that preach extremism or breed terror, and jointly curb Saudi and Iranian funding for extremist groups. These efforts, however, will succeed only if Islamabad ends its policy of supporting militant groups for proxy wars in neighboring Afghanistan and India.

The United States need not take sides in the Sunni/Shi'ite sectarian conflict, but should rather stand firmly on behalf of principles that benefit both communities, first and foremost among them religious liberty and equality of opportunity. Should the United States pursue such a path, not only will freedom benefit, but so too will American national security.

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